

“It’s Complicated”: Facebook and Political Participation in Italy and the UK

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Abstract

Drawing from an extensive and unique data set acquired by combining a cross-national comparative approach and a mixed methods methodology, this thesis examines the contributions of Facebook to citizens' political participation in Italy and the UK. In the last decade there has been a proliferation of academic studies investigating the links between digital technologies and citizens' political participation, with an increasing number of publications focusing on social networking websites (SNSs). Within this specific sub-field, research has produced contrasting evidence. Some scholars stress the positive impact of the Internet and SNSs on political participation (i.e., optimists), while others minimise their mobilising power, emphasising their tendency to reinforce existing participatory trends (i.e., normalisers) or highlighting their limited or even negative influence on political participation (i.e., pessimists).

The present research differs from the majority of investigations in this area in three ways. Firstly, the data for this study were gathered mostly in a non-electoral period and thus the contributions of Facebook to citizens' political participation were assessed independently of the electoral process, which usually occasions a rise in political participation. In addition, this research tackled two conceptual weaknesses characterising many Internet and political participation studies: the failure to consider political participation as a multidimensional phenomenon and the over-generalised approach to Internet and SNS usages. It did so by differentiating between political communication and political mobilisation activities, and three Facebook non-political usages, i.e., information, interpersonal communication, and social recreation. Thirdly, in response to the lack of cross-national comparative studies in this subject area, the contributions of Facebook to citizens' political participation were examined in the different contexts of Italy and the United Kingdom.

This thesis makes four main contributions to the field of political communication, and more specifically to the strand of research examining the impact of digital technologies on political participation. The first contribution is the Particularised Model of Facebook Political Participation. The model identifies a number of factors mediating the links between Facebook and political participation, demonstrating the relevance of both external, context-related factors related to the British and Italian media and political landscapes, and more personal, subjective ones such as self-presentation, pre-existing levels of political engagement, and the nature and size of the Facebook network. Secondly, this study sheds light on the ways that Facebook

functions as a political platform, establishing that dynamics typical of both new and traditional media are in action on this SNS, and that Facebook holds the capacity to activate a *virtuous circle*, thereby generating an *information-led mobilisation*. The third contribution is the Dual Routes of Exposure Model which offers clarification on the alleged tendency of digital technologies to promote selective exposure and, consequently, political fragmentation and polarisation, and shows that Facebook can operate as a potential antidote to such trends. The fourth contribution is to the polarised debate between optimists, normalisers, and pessimist, with the present research further highlighting the sterility of such a debate and indicating potentially fruitful approaches for the development of the field.

Keywords: political participation; Facebook; the Internet; political communication; mobilisation; mixed methods; comparative; cross-national; Italy; United Kingdom.

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List of Abbreviations

Association of Internet Researchers	AoIR
British Sample.....	BS
British Participant.....	BP
Civic Voluntarism Model	CVM
Dual Routes of Exposure Model.....	DREM
Elaboration Likelihood Model	ELM
European Socio-economic Classification	ESeC
European Social Survey.....	ESS
Italian Participant	IP
Italian Sample	IS
International Standard Classification of Education	ISCED
Interquartile Range.....	IQR
Mixed Methods	MM
Movimento 5 Stelle.....	M5S
Particularised Model of Facebook Political Participation.....	PMFPP
Queen Margaret University	QMU
Research Question	RQ
Socio-Economic Status Model.....	SES
Social Networking Website	SNS
World Wide Web.....	WWW

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 A Political Communication Study

The idea of examining how Facebook can contribute to citizens' political participation came to the author after reflections on the political decline characterising Italy's recent history. This decline started with the Democrazia Cristiana's 50-year "reign" and, arguably, reached its peak with the entry of Silvio Berlusconi into the political arena. Since 1994 – although less in the last couple of years – the Italian political scenario has been dominated by the figure of Berlusconi, who polarised the political landscape, splitting the Italian electorate practically in half: Berlusconi's supporters vs Berlusconi's opponents. This state of affairs has recently changed due to the ascent of a third political force, aside from the Left and the Right, the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S). Being politically left-leaning, the author has always had an aversion to Berlusconi and to what he represents. Due to the former Prime Minister's control over the Italian media (see Section 6.1 for a detailed explanation), to obtain political information the author looked at TV programs traditionally affiliated to the Left, such as *Annozero* and *Ballarò*, and resorted to the Internet to avoid news bulletins that he perceived to be highly biased. Living in the UK, the author employed Facebook as the main way to keep in touch with his Italian friends and noticed how stories, news, and links containing anti-Berlusconi views, and criticism of the Italian political class in general, were being circulated more and more on this platform. This outburst of anti-party sentiment reached its height during the recent financial crisis, which exacerbated Italians' disenchantment towards the political elite who seemed more interested in Berlusconi's judicial problems than in the issues affecting average citizens.

Considering that some people used Facebook to voice their disapproval of the political class, the author wondered if this was specific to Italy, linked to the Italian political and media landscapes, or if it was also happening in the UK. Even if the level of public disaffection with political institutions was somewhat less in the UK than in Italy, a general degree of disaffection was nonetheless discerned by the author through casual conversations with friends and colleagues. After some research into the links between the Internet and politics, and further developments with social networking websites (SNSs) themselves – for instance, Facebook was starting to be used more extensively around the world for organising and coordinating political initiatives – the author decided to consider not only how Italian and British citizens employ Facebook to obtain political information and express political opinions, but also if this SNS could itself foster their participation in protests or other

political initiatives. The author thus decided that this thesis would focus on citizens' political participation which, as Section 2.1.1 explains, is a complex phenomenon encompassing a wide range of participatory activities.

Political participation can be approached through various interlinked theoretical lenses. Some studies are concerned with the role and relevance of political participation in democratic systems (Barber 1984; Habermas 1989; Evans 2001; Fischer 2003). Others attempt to classify the different levels of political participation and types of participants (Arnstein 1969; Bang 2005; Milbrath 1965; Verba and Nie 1972) or, like the present research, try to identify the factors which contribute to political activity (Brundidge 2007; Delli Carpini 2004; Kenski and Stroud 2006; Verba et al. 1995; Wang 2007).

This thesis explores how Facebook can contribute to British and Italian citizens' political participation and falls within the field of political communication. Political communication studies the role of communication in the political process (Chaffee 1975). This discipline traces its roots right back to Aristotle's and Plato's studies of rhetoric and history. In its modern form, political communication is highly interdisciplinary, drawing on concepts from several fields such as mass communication, political science, sociology and psychology (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Kaid 2004; Ryfe 2001). The present research can be considered a text-book political communication study in that it inherits the interest in attitudes, opinions, and beliefs from social psychology (Ryfe 2001), while borrowing its focus on behaviours from the behaviourist school of political science (see Dahl – 1961–, Kirkpatrick – 1962 – and Adcock – 2007 – for a discussion of the behaviourist turn in political science). Finally, by investigating the effects of Facebook usage on citizens' political behaviours, this study assumes an effects-style approach in the fashion of mass communication research (Lievrouw 2009).

Over the last decade in the field of political communication, there has been a proliferation of academic studies addressing the relationship between the Internet and politics (Chadwick and Howard 2009; Holtz-Bacha 2004; Wang 2007). These developments in scholarship are linked to several current trends in societies: the progressive integration of the Internet into the lives of many individuals, social and political organisations (Baym 2010; Chadwick 2006; Chadwick and Howard 2009; Papacharissi 2011; van Dijck 2013); the growing detachment of citizens from the political process (Dalton 2004; Hay 2007; Norris 2011; Pharr and Putnam 2000); and the changing social, psychological, technological and economic conditions (Bennett and Iyengar 2008).

Studies assessing the impact of the Internet on the realm of politics cover a diverse array of issues: the credibility of online political information; media ownership; commercialisation of cyberspace; online political campaigning; and citizens' political activism and participation (Tedesco 2004), with an increasing number of publications focusing on this last topic (Anduiza et al. 2009). In the last few years, within this strand of research, many investigations have concentrated on SNSs and have examined how such platforms can contribute to political campaigning, engagement and participation (Ancu and Cozma 2009; Gustafsson 2012; Holt et al. 2013; Kim and Geidner 2008; Marichal 2013; Mascheroni 2012; Vitak et al. 2011; Warren et al. 2014; Xenos et al. 2014). This type of enquiry has further flourished with the explosion of the Arab Spring, the pro-democracy wave of rebellions which occurred in the Arab world between the end of 2010 and 2011, and SNSs have become a hot topic for academics all over the world (Khamis and Vaughn 2012; Lim 2012; Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2011; Tufekci and Wilson 2012).

This thesis adds to the latter stream of research. Although the links between Facebook and political participation are assessed in different national settings, the unit of analysis of the present research, as is often the case in political communication studies (Moy et al. 2012; Ryfe 2001), is the individual. Hence a bottom-up approach is employed. Rather than addressing the ways in which political parties can take advantage of Facebook, the thesis focuses on how citizens can employ this online platform for political purposes outside electoral periods.

In particular, as outlined in detail in Section 4.3, this research aims:

- To explore the advantages and limitations of Facebook as a political platform and to clarify the links between Facebook, Internet and offline political participation – is Facebook an additional venue for the participation of citizens who are already politically active offline and on other online platforms, or can political participation start on this SNS and move then to other channels? – adding to the debate among Internet optimists, pessimists and normalisers (see Section 3.1).
- To assess whether the contributions of Facebook to political participation vary in relation to different types of political activities (i.e., political communication vs mobilisation) and Facebook usage practices (i.e., information, communication, and entertainment) advocating for the adoption of a particularised approach in Internet and political participation research (see Section 4.1).

- To identify possible factors (e.g., demographic variables, pre-existing levels of political engagement, Facebook usage time, etc.) mediating the contributions of Facebook to political participation reviewing and enhancing the explanatory models of political participation developed so far (see Section 2.1.2).

In relation to this last point, the comparative component of the present research proved particularly useful as it enabled the identification of contextual conditions prompting variations in Facebook political participation, and shed light on more general determinants of this complex phenomenon (see Sections 6.1 and 6.6).

This study, therefore, examines the conditions under which citizens participate politically on Facebook, and how Facebook use enhances or detracts from such behaviour. It does so with a unique data set which was acquired by examining a diverse range of activities falling under the umbrella of political participation, through a cross-national comparative approach and a mixed methods (MM) methodology – two extra analytical layers that made this research particularly complex, but also provided a richness not achievable otherwise.

This thesis is approximately 100,000 words long, including references, tables, and appendices, and its overall structure takes the form of seven chapters, including this introductory one. The first introductory chapter offers an overview of recent developments in the political communication field, into which the present research fits, and of the political participatory trends characterising Western democracies, and more specifically Italy and the UK. Chapter Two lays out the theoretical dimensions of the research, identifying and defining relevant terminology and concepts. It begins by providing a definition of political participation and presenting various explanatory models of this phenomenon, moving on to describe the main features of the Internet, SNSs and Facebook. In the third chapter, the academic literature investigating the links between these technologies and political participation is reviewed, firstly considering political participation in general, then taking into account specific forms of political participation such as the consumption of political information, political discussion, and political mobilisation. The fourth chapter deals with the approaches and methodology used in this study. It explains the value of adopting a cross-national approach and a MM methodology, and describes the various procedures and methods used in this investigation. Chapter Five presents the findings of the research, focusing on the three research questions and various sub-questions developed in Section 4.3. The sixth chapter draws upon the results, tying up the various theoretical and empirical

strands presented in the thesis in order to shed light on how Facebook can contribute to Italian and British citizens' political participation. This chapter includes a discussion of the implications of the findings, the limitations of the study, and avenues for future research. Finally, in the seventh and last chapter, a summary of the main findings, principal issues and suggestions which have arisen in this thesis is provided.

1.2 Democratic Deficit and the Rise of New Forms of Political Participation

In the last decade, as explained in the previous section, an increasing number of investigations have examined how digital technologies can contribute to citizens' political participation. Dahlgren (2009) indicates that this course in scholarship could be, in part, attributed to the fact that the rise of the Internet coincided with what has been described in the literature as *democratic deficit*, namely citizens' growing dissatisfaction with democratic political institutions and their detachment from the political process. These circumstances pushed governments and academics to look for possible solutions which could reverse such a negative trend, with some scholars identifying the Internet as a kind of "magic elixir" able to increase citizens' participation and, consequently, to legitimise governments (Stromer-Galley 2003).

According to numerous academics, the democratic deficit characterises many Western democracies (Dalton 2004; Hay 2007; Norris 2011; Pharr and Putnam 2000; Torcal and Montero 2006; van Deth et al. 2007) and, as the next section illustrates, is particularly relevant to Italy and the United Kingdom. Conceptually, democracy refers to a political praxis that, as indicated in its Greek roots *demos* (i.e., people) and *kratos* (i.e., power), can be termed as *rule of the people*. Over the centuries, different theorisations of democracy have been developed, theorisations which spell out how democracy should be organised and how it should work (representative democracy, direct democracy, etc.). The various conceptualisations of democracy may disagree on the extent to which citizens should take part in the decision making process, on the spheres of society in need of regulations, or on the agents who should act. However, all these theorisations agree that citizens should have some form of control over society; all agree that citizens should participate politically. Although Aristotle (cf. 1999) was not an advocate of democracy – to the contrary he argued that democracy was one of the least favourable systems, since government of the majority would easily lead to the rule of the non-virtuous – he described man as *a political animal*,

and contended that his ability to participate in politics was the virtue that distinguished man from animals.

Investigations examining the impact of the Internet on political participation all seem to attribute a positive connotation to political participation and be grounded, as Moy et al. (2012) observe, in the assumption and normative position that political participation is beneficial to both citizens and democratic institutions. This stance is supported by several influential political scientists such as Barber (1984), Evans (2001) and Fischer (2003). In line with Barber's (1984) notion of *strong democracy*, Evans (2001) argues that political institutions can be considered democratic only when citizens participate in the resolution of the issues affecting their lives. Along the same lines, Fischer (2003) regards citizens' participation as "the cornerstone of the democratic political process" (p. 205), stressing that citizens have both the right and the obligation to participate in the public decision-making process. This belief, however, is not universally recognised. For instance, as noted by Norris (2007, p. 629), the realist school (Schumpeter – 1952 – is arguably the most influential advocate of this stance) contends that as long as there are fair and free elections held at regular intervals, even limited public involvement is sufficient to guarantee stable and accountable government.

The purpose of this thesis is not to embark on an exploration of the value of political participation in democratic systems, but rather to shed light on the capability of a specific Internet tool, Facebook, to contribute to a fundamental component of any democratic system: citizens' political participation. In order to do so, participatory trends in Western democracies have to be considered. Despite the importance of citizens' participation for democratic societies, and the presence of countless ways through which the represented can connect with their representatives (e.g., public meetings, petitions, demonstrations, and elections), citizens' involvement in the political process has proved to be a problematic issue. Ward and Gibson (2009) argue that political systems are failing to catch up with the on-going trends in today's society. They observe that due to an increasing freedom of choice, individualism and consumerism, citizens have become more and more accustomed to being offered products and services matching their specific preferences. Because of these societal and technological developments, citizens require more direct and personalised forms of engagement, as the broadcast model does not offer the required depth and richness (Coleman 2009).

Consequently, several studies demonstrate the public discontent and disaffection with mechanisms and institutions of representative democracy (Dalton 2004; Hay 2007; Norris 2011; Pharr and Putnam 2000). Norris (2011) identifies three possible explanations for such a phenomenon: negative news, growing public expectations, and the failure of governments to live up to such expectations. The disenchantment with and distrust of traditional institutions, which has been furthered by the economic crisis of 2008 (Uslaner 2010), is confirmed by a consistent decline in mainstream party and trade union memberships across Western Europe over the past thirty years, a growth in anti-party sentiment, and an increasing lack of knowledge or interest in such organisations (Ward and Gibson 2009; Norris 2007; van Biezen and Poguntke 2014; van Biezen et al. 2012).

However, political disenchantment does not have to be confused with political apathy. In this sense, Dalton (2004) and Norris (2011) observe that in advanced industrial societies, citizens are still committed to democratic principles despite their dissatisfaction with the performance of democratic institutions. Citizens' detachment from political institutions has triggered some changes in the way people participate in the political process (Hay 2007; McHugh and Parvin 2005; Norris 2002). Norris (2002) speaks of a *democratic phoenix* and argues that the disengagement from traditional forms of political participation has led to the emergence of new and unconventional participatory practices. As the popularity of bottom-up single-issue initiatives (Pattie et al. 2003), as well as the surge of new social movements and Internet activism exemplifies, Norris (2002) argues that over the years political participation has evolved and diversified, in terms of "the agencies (collective organizations structuring political activity), repertoires (the actions commonly used for political expression), and targets (the political actors that participants seek to influence)" (p. 215).

Thus in the last couple of decades, citizens' participatory repertoires have transformed and expanded due to the decay of traditional forms of political participation, changes in the ways citizens perceive politics and relate to political institutions, and due also to the rise and diffusion of new channels of participation like the Internet. In this sense, Bennett (1998) observes a shift from traditional institutionalised politics to what he describes as *lifestyle politics*, namely the tendency of citizens "to organise social and political meaning around their lifestyle values and the personal narratives that express them" (Bennett 2004, p. 104). In her book, *A Private Sphere*, Papacharissi (2010) claims that nowadays civic engagement is shaped by citizens' personal agendas, and she calls for a reconsideration of *the praxis of citizenship*. Bennett (1998) and Papacharissi's (2010) considerations spring from the notion

of *life politics* originally developed by Giddens (1991), who notes the rise of personal choice matters in the political sphere.

Aligning with such notions in his recent book, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, Castells (2012) analyses the role of the Internet in the Arab Spring, the Spanish Indignados and the Occupy Wall Street movement, noting the rise of a *culture of autonomy* in which individuals define their actions according to their values and interests. Independently from the institutions of society, through networking, they find likeminded individuals to pursue common goals (Castells 2012). Considering such a tendency towards individualisation, Bennett (2012) proposes a new framework for understanding large-scale individualised collective actions. He maintains that social fragmentation and the decline of group loyalties have promoted the development of personalised politics, in which individually expressive personal action frames replace collective action frames (Bennett 2012). In the last few years, several mobilisations concerning causes such as economic justice and environmental protection have developed around personal lifestyle values, and have often been coordinated through digital media. The rise of personalised politics, where political participation becomes an expression of personal lifestyles, hopes and grievances, has led – according to Bennett and Segerberg (2012) – to the emergence of an alternative model of action: *the logic of connective action*. In the more conventional logic of *collective action*, emphasis is put on the formation of collective identity. In contrast, connective action networks are far more individualised and technologically enabled than the ones in which action is organised on the basis of group identity, membership, or ideology. Among the various online technologies, Vromen et al. (2015) stress that SNSs are particularly suited to supporting personalised self-actualising and communicative forms of political participation akin to Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) logic of connective action. As an example, one such form of participation is political consumerism, a lifestyle choice subject to sharing and social influence (Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland, and Bimber 2014). In light of these considerations, Loader et al. (2014) draw the profile of the *networked young citizen*, who is less likely to become a member of a political party or trade union, more inclined to participate in horizontal or non-hierarchical networks and engage in lifestyle politics; who is not dutiful but self-actualising, and whose social relations are increasingly enacted in the networked environment of social media.

The rise of new and more individualised forms of political participation suggests that citizens are not politically apathetic today, an argument which is further reinforced by the voter turnout of the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum – which reached a staggering

84% of the voting population (McInnes et al. 2014). However, there is still a degree of detachment between citizens and the political process in many Western democracies. In a healthy democracy, citizens must be able to engage with the formal democratic process. In order to guarantee the quality of the democratic experience, the links between political institutions and their publics must therefore be restored (Marsh and McLean 2012; McHugh and Parvin 2005).

1.3 Political Culture and Participation in Italy and the United Kingdom

The previous section has highlighted the sense of political disenchantment present in many Western democracies, a diagnosis which applies to both Italy and the UK (Donovan and Onofri 2008; Hansard Society 2013, 2014; Mannheimer and Sani 2001; Lodge and Gough 2009; Miller and Williamson 2008; Whiteley 2012), the two countries on which this thesis focuses.

Before considering citizens' political participation in Italy and the UK, an analysis of the main similarities and differences of Italian and British political cultures will help to elucidate the participatory trends occurring in these two countries. *Political culture*, a term coined by Almond in 1956, refers to "the pattern of individual attitudes and orientations toward politics among the members of a political system" (Almond and Bingham Powell 1966, p. 50). In Almond and Verba's (1963) influential classic, *Civic Culture*, the political cultures of five different countries – including Italy and Britain – were examined. According to Almond and Verba's (1963) analysis, the Italian political culture was characterised by political alienation, social isolation and distrust, and low national pride. In contrast, British citizens had a greater allegiance to and support for their political system and institutions, and had greater faith in their own ability to influence national decisions. Despite having different political cultures at the time, both populations displayed low levels of political participation. In Italy, this was ascribed to Italians' strong distrust of government and politics in general, whereas in the case of the UK, the lack of participation was attributed to the fact that British citizens had little motivation to participate as they were content with their political system and, consequently, left political matters to political leaders.

Approximately two decades later, Bertsch et al. (1986) observed a decrease in the allegiance between citizens and government in Britain. This negative trend was also noted by Kavanagh (1989). Kavanagh (1989) recognised changes in citizens' sense of political efficacy, which

refers to one's perception of her/his ability to affect the political process, and a growing dissatisfaction with the way the political system worked and the policies it produced. Kavanagh (1989) argued that this was due to a decline in deferential and supportive elements (e.g., support for the monarchy and the unelected House of Lords). This interpretation is supported by Eatwell (1997), who suggests that Britain's civic culture relied a lot on leadership, and failures in this area furthered its deterioration, and also by Kakabadse et al. (2003) and Williamson (2007), who claim that today's public distrust is further aggravated by a general belief that the concerns of well-resourced lobbies are heard above those of citizens.

With respect to Italy, Bertsch et al. (1986) contended that not much had changed since Almond and Verba's (1963) study, with the Italian political culture remaining an alienated one. Sani (1989) questions in part Bertsch et al.'s (1986) analysis and argues that Almond and Verba (1963) present an excessively negative picture. Sani (1989) observes that Italian citizens' exposure to political information and political involvement had increased over the years, due to a rise in the levels of education in the population, a greater diffusion of media, and the higher saliency of political phenomena for citizens. On the other hand, he stresses that Italians' evaluation of the political system, which in Almond and Verba's (1963) account was characterised by very low confidence, became even more negative, confirming the widespread unhappiness with Italy's political condition (Sani 1989). The main trait of Italian political culture remains, today, a chronic and long-term dissatisfaction with the political system, as evidenced by Donovan and Onofri (2008) and Bull and Newell (2005). In this sense, the situation today is not so different from the 1960s and 70s – the ideological dissatisfaction with the system which existed then still exists today, although now this dissatisfaction is linked to the debasement of Italian politics in recent years (Donovan and Onofri 2008).

In brief, Britain's political culture, which, according to Almond and Verba's (1963) analysis, was characterised by high levels of political efficacy, support and deference towards the political system in the 1960 and 70s, has been affected by a decline in deferential and supportive elements in the last twenty years. On the other hand, Italian political culture has always been defined by mistrust and dissatisfaction with the state and other political institutions. Blondel and Inoguchi's (2006) comparative study, and the Eurobarometer data from 2006 as reported upon by Donovan and Onofri (2008), confirm this picture and show that the public's general attitude towards politics and government is similar today in Italy and the United Kingdom.

British and Italian citizens' political disenchantment affects, without doubt, the ways they participate in politics. In Italy, forms of political participation associated with political institutions have undergone a substantial decrease in the last fifty years (Segatti 2006). On the other hand, Sani (1989) reported a rise in the frequency of sit-ins, demonstrations, occupations of public buildings, plants and offices, blocking of railroads and highways, a trend confirmed also in more recent studies which establish that many Italians participate in demonstrations, boycotts, and petitions (Della Porta et al. 2006; Quaranta 2012). These participatory forms, as explained by Sani (1989), differ from the traditional ones as they are more socially visible, more spontaneous and less directed by political organisations and institutions. In addition, another recent investigation by ISTAT (2010) reveals that, in the last decade, there has been a rise in Italy in forms of political participation which can be described as *invisible*, such as consumption of political information and political discussion.

In the last few years, under the pressure of the worldwide economic crisis and in the wake of the Arab Spring and Spanish Indignados, Italy has experienced a period of social and political turbulence, with many citizens engaging politically more and more through the Internet and social media (De Cindio and Stortone 2013). The relevance of digital technologies for Italians' political participation has been demonstrated by the achievements of the Movimento Viola – using the Internet as their main organisational and promotional tool, they organised a successful national protest against Berlusconi, the No B Day (Mascia 2010) – and most of all by the success of a new player in Italian politics, the M5S. The M5S, which refuses to be considered a political party, priding itself on its anti-establishment, bottom-up nature, was founded by the Italian comedian Beppe Grillo and the entrepreneur Roberto Casaleggio in 2009. By taking advantage of Italians' anti-party sentiment and using extensively online communication platforms in combination with offline meet-ups, Grillo and Casaleggio created a movement which, within a few years, became one of the top political forces of the country, receiving 25% of total preferences in the 2013 Italian general election, falling only 4% short from the Centre-Left and the Centre-Right coalitions (Bartlett et al. 2013).

An overview of Italians' political participation has revealed limited levels of participation in more traditional political activities, but has shown a growth in many other forms of participation, such as the consumption of political information, political discussion, participation in contentious political actions and online political activities. A similar picture emerges in the UK. British citizens in the last decade have not demonstrated increased engagement in some of the above political activities, such as taking part in demonstrations or

contacting elected officials. Rather, levels of engagement in this respect have remained fairly stable (Wilks-Heeg et al. 2012). However, possibly due to the presence of a relatively high profile government/parliamentary e-petitions system (Hansard Society 2013), petitions appear to be more widespread in the UK than in Italy, and, among British online users, signing a petition is the most popular political activity after voting (Williamson 2010). Although there has been an increase in petition signing – as shown in the 2013 report of the Hansard Society on political engagement – the British public remains disengaged and disillusioned, and the sense of indifference towards politics is seemingly on the rise. The 2014 report indicates small improvements in this sense, but still confirms the limited political activity of the British public, particularly in relation to more time-consuming forms of action, such as contributing to an online discussion or attending a political meeting (Hansard Society 2014). The Scottish Independence Referendum with its 84% voter turnout, the highest turnout in Scotland since the vote was extended to women in 1918 (McInnes et al. 2014), contradicts in part such trends. However, these figures apply only to the Scottish context, and are possibly linked to the “personal” nature of this vote and the role played by national identity in it. The staggering voter turnout prompted by the Scottish referendum has not been replicated in the wider UK population for the 2015 general election, which brought only 66.2% of voters to the polls – only a slight increase on the 65.1% turnout in 2010 (Hawkins et al. 2015). Similarly to Italians, British citizens are increasingly less likely to engage with mainstream political parties, as shown in a recent report by Keen (2015) who highlights that the membership of the three main political parties is at a historic low, with less than 1% of the British electorate being members of the Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat Party (on the other hand the membership of smaller, often nationalist, parties like the SNP, Greens, and UKIP is on the rise). Possible factors behind such a trend are the general public's lack of identification with formal party politics, and the fact that people are now drawn towards single-issue campaigns and organisations which cut across parties and allow a less structured and less formal political engagement (Power Enquiry 2006).

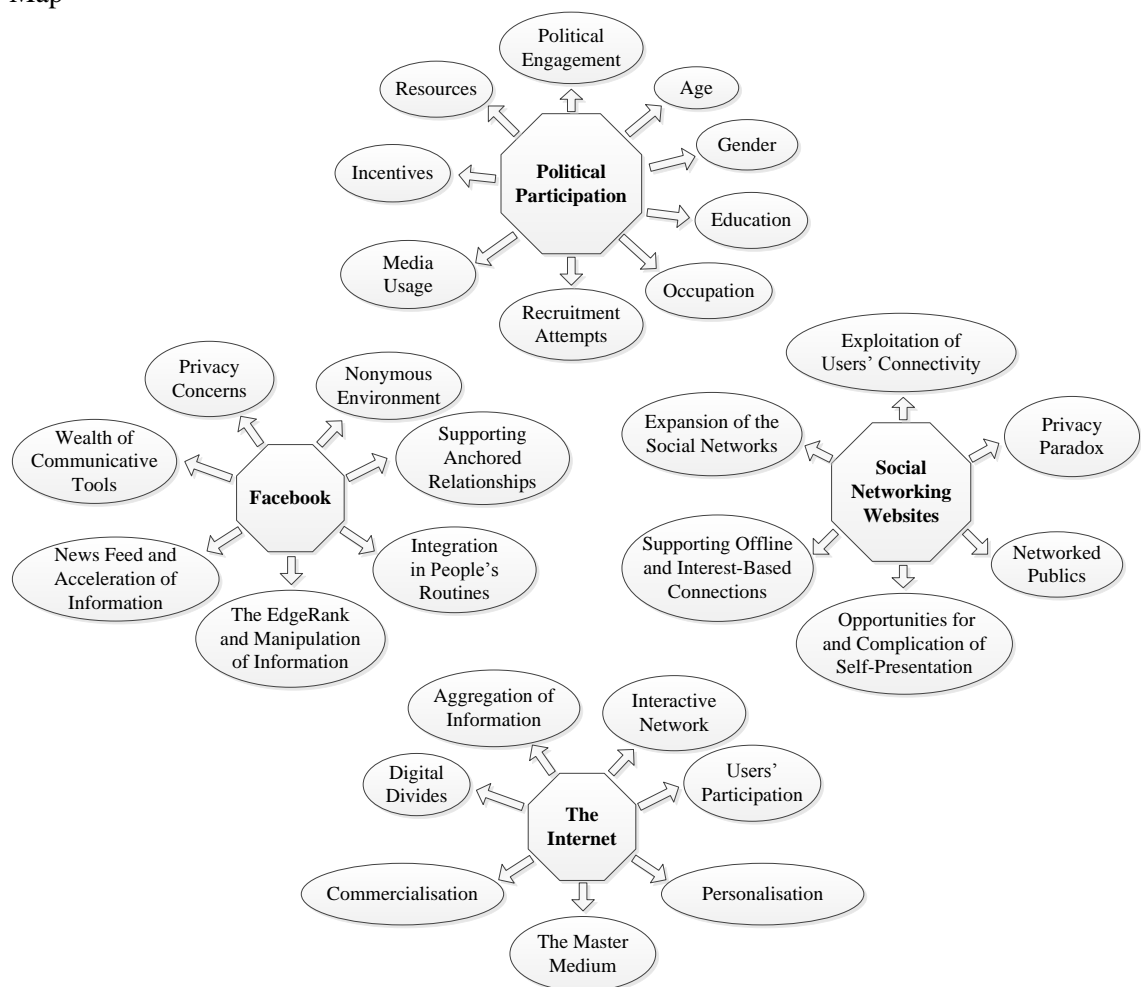
To summarise, in both Italy and the UK many citizens are strongly dissatisfied with mainstream political parties and institutions (Curran et al. 2014; Donovan and Onofri 2008; Lodge and Gough 2009; Mannheimer and Sani 2001; Miller and Williamson 2008), and participation in formal party politics has decreased sharply in the last two decades (Segatti 2006; Whiteley 2012; Wilks-Heeg et al. 2012). Some British citizens have moved towards a form of activism associated with less traditional organisations and more single-issue in nature (Power Enquiry 2006). A similar phenomenon has occurred in Italy, the difference

being that Italians have also increased their consumption of political information, political discussion, and participation in contentious actions and online political activities (De Cindio and Stortone 2013; Quaranta 2012). In the light of these findings, a comparison between Italy and the UK in terms of political participation seems reasonable. This thesis develops the comparison and, focusing specifically on Facebook, examines how this online platform can contribute to citizens' political participation, and how political activity on this SNS fits within the highlighted participatory trends.

2 POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, THE INTERNET, AND SOCIALNETWORKING WEBSITES: KEY CONCEPTS

This chapter aims to provide a theoretical framework through which political participation can be approached and the links between this phenomenon and digital technologies considered. To this end, it identifies and defines relevant terminology and concepts. The chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, political participation is defined, its determinants – as indicated by research – discussed, and various models seeking to explain this phenomenon presented. The second, third and fourth sections focus respectively on the Internet, SNSs and Facebook, lay out the features and affordances of these technologies, and examine their impact on society and individuals. The figure below provides a conceptual map of the chapter and highlights the main themes which emerge from the review of the relevant academic literature.

Figure 1 - Political Participation, the Internet and Social Networking Websites: Conceptual Map



2.1 Political Participation: A Complex and Multifaceted Phenomenon

2.1.1 Defining political participation

Political participation is a popular and widely investigated subject in academic studies. Many scholars offer theorisations and definitions of this phenomenon, or rather *array* of phenomena, leading to studies that examine a diverse variety of political activities ranging from voting and campaigning to political discussion and consumption of political information (e.g., Borge and Cardenal 2010; Dalton, 2008; Fowler et al. 2008; Kavanaugh et al. 2008; Kenski and Stroud 2006; Wang 2007). As the findings of a political participation study are highly contingent upon the considered political activities (Verba et al. 1995), it is essential to provide a definition of political participation and clarify the theoretical framework through which this topic has been approached in this thesis.

One of the most influential and utilised theorisations of political participation is developed by Verba et al. (1995) who, in their seminal work *Voice and Equality*, speak of voluntary political participation, referring to the “activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government actions – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (p. 38). According to Verba et al. (1995), the ultimate purpose of political participation is mobilisation, namely influencing governments’ actions, either directly (e.g., by contacting public officials) or indirectly by influencing citizens (e.g., persuading a person to support a political party or candidate). This explains why Verba et al. (1995) exclude from their study activities such as following political news or discussing politics with friends, but include the following actions: voting; attending protests, marches, or demonstrations; contributing to electoral campaigns and political organisations; participating in voluntary associations; donating money to political causes; and contacting government officials.

Verba et al.’s (1995) definition is often adopted in studies addressing the impact of the Internet on political participation (e.g., Calenda and Meijer 2009; Dimitrova et al. 2014; Dutta-Bergman and Chung 2005). For instance, Calenda and Meijer (2009), focusing on how young people employ the Internet for political participation, distinguish between traditional forms of participation (e.g., voting in elections, campaigning for elections, membership of political parties, fundraising for political candidates) and *new politics* (e.g., involvement in non-partisan networks, membership of single-issue movements), both of which include activities which fall under Verba et al.’s (1995) conceptualisation.

Given the rise of new, more individualised and personalised forms of participation, as discussed in Section 1.2, and the diffusion of digital technologies, a more modern and up-to-date definition of political participation seems to be needed. In a review of Whiteley's (2012) *Political Participation in Britain*, Fox (2014) remarks that in the light of societal changes and technological advancements, definitions of political participation which focus exclusively on behaviours aiming to influence governments' action are too narrow. Likewise, in his paper on Facebook groups and activism, Marichal (2013) suggests that political participation on SNSs should be understood "less as intentional efforts to promote social and political change and more as a discursive performance designed to express a political identity", a conception embraced also in other Internet and political participation studies (Sanford and Rose 2007; Ward and de Vreese 2011).

In line with such premises, this thesis develops a more wide-ranging definition of political participation. This definition includes, under the conceptual umbrella of political participation, those political behaviours described by Christy (1987) as *communication activities*. Christy (1987) distinguishes three commonly examined types of political participation: electoral activity (e.g., voting, attending campaign meetings, working for a candidate or party), contacting activity (e.g., contacting government officials), and communication activity. Communication activity is a form of political participation not channelled through political institutions and reflects a more exclusive and individual interest and a psychological involvement in politics (e.g., certain forms of political discussion, following politics in the mass media). The necessity of taking communication activities into account is also confirmed by a recent study examining citizens' motivations to engage in politics online: Hoffman et al. (2013) establish that people's political activity is driven by both a desire to influence government as well as to communicate political ideas, with citizens recognising that the majority of political acts serve the second rather than the first purpose. In the light of these considerations, political participation is defined in this thesis as:

the set of activities influencing or aiming to influence governments' actions and other individuals' political behaviours, and/or reflecting individuals' interest and psychological involvement in politics.

This definition is essentially a hybrid one, arising from the combination of Verba et al. (1995) and Christy's (1987) conceptualisations. At the same time, it embraces what could be labelled as the *mobilisation dimension* – influencing or aiming to influence governments' actions and other individuals' political behaviours – and the *communication dimension* –

reflecting individuals' interest and psychological involvement in politics. It thus covers a wealth of participatory activities ranging from more traditional forms of participation, such as contacting a politician, to recently emerged forms, such as e-petitions or expressing political opinions online.

2.1.2 Explaining political participation

As the previous sections have shown, political participation is a complex phenomenon encompassing a wide range of participatory activities. Numerous explanatory models and theories of political participation have been developed in academia. In their study on party activism in Britain, Whiteley and Seyd (2002) identify five main models of political participation: the Social Psychological Model; the Rational Choice Model; the General Incentives Model; the Mobilisation Model; and the Civic Voluntarism Model.

A key contributor to the social psychological approach to political participation is Fishbein (1967). As Whiteley and Seyd (2002) explain, Fishbein (1967) argues that three kinds of variables function as the basic determinants of behaviour: "(1) attitudes toward the behaviour; (2) normative beliefs (both personal and social); and (3) motivation to comply with the norms" (p. 490). According to this notion, behaviour can be explained in terms of expected benefits and social norms. Individuals are in fact utilitarian, capable of calculating the benefits of different courses of actions, but they are also embedded in networks of social norms and beliefs, their political actions therefore determined by the interaction between these two sets of variables (Muller 1979).

Another model of participation is the Rational Choice Model, which finds its roots in Downs's (1957) ground-breaking work, *Economic Theory of Democracy*. Downs (1957) maintains that self-interest and, consequently, cost-effectiveness are the cornerstones of political behaviour. According to this theoretical approach, an individual acts out of self-interest in a rational way. Rational action involves utility maximisation: a person, when confronted with various options, will pick up the one that, in her/his account, best serves her/his objectives (Green and Shapiro 1994). However, as Olson (1965) highlights, when trying to explain political participation, rational choice theories have to face the so-called *paradox of participation*. Taking into consideration the participation in collective actions, Olson (1965) observes that the products of political parties – such as policies – are public goods. Public goods benefit every citizen independently of who took part in the development

and implementation of the policies. Therefore, for rational, self-interested actors, the most cost-effective way to achieve this goal would be free-riding, rather than actively taking part in the process. To overcome the *paradox of participation*, Olson (1965) introduces the notion of *selective incentives*. Accordingly, citizens could, for instance, decide to join trade unions because of selective incentives, such as free legal advice or discounts on certain products. Olson's (1965) explanation is certainly valid for forms of participation such as joining a political party or a union, but it falls short in explaining behaviours such as voting, from which selective incentives are largely absent (Whiteley and Seyd 2002).

The General Incentives Model integrates Olson (1965) and Fishbein's (1967) theorisations, and rests on the premise that citizens need three types of incentives in order to participate in politics: outcome, process and ideological incentives. *Outcome incentives* are introduced by Olson (1965), and refer to the achievement of specific goals (e.g., becoming member of a political party in order to pursue a career in politics); *process incentives* derive from the process of participation itself (e.g., feeling entertained when participating in a political protest); *ideological incentives* enable individuals to give expressions to deeply held beliefs and interact with like-minded individuals (Whiteley and Seyd 2002).

The Mobilisation Model approaches political participation from a completely different perspective, asserting that political opportunities in the environment and stimuli coming from other individuals trigger political participation (Whiteley and Seyd 2002). This model is particularly relevant to the present study as it links participation to citizens' settings and social networks. Social networks can be described as "a set of nodes (where connections are made either through individuals or organisational units) and the linkages between them" (Gilchrist 2004, p. 29), and, according to Castells (1996), they are the *new social morphology* of the contemporary era. Bimber (2001) holds the view that social networks have the potential to foster political participation and lead to the engagement of passive members of the public. Similarly, Putman (2000), concentrating on social capital which refers to "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p. 19), stresses how political conversations typical of social gatherings may generate collective action, a process which could explain the positive links between political participation and participation in civic associations consistently found in the literature (Delli Carpini 2004; Putman 2000; Verba et al. 1995).

Lim (2008, p. 964) points out how numerous studies found that personal networks can lead to participation in social and political movements (Nepstad and Smith 1999; Passy and

Giugni 2001; Viterna 2006). Research by Brady et al. (1999) shows that recruitment attempts tend to be more successful if coming from personal contacts (i.e., strong ties), rather than from strangers, or secondary connections (i.e., weak ties) – see Section 2.3 for a further discussion of strong and weak ties. Using the same data set, Lim (2008) paints a slightly different picture and highlights that the closeness of the relationship does not impact decisively on the response to recruiting attempts. In line with the findings of Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995), who examine the relationship between interpersonal influences and voting decisions, Lim (2008) establishes that a common interest in politics and shared political identity influence political mobilisation more than the strength of ties. He identifies two possible explanations for these results. One reason could be that civic associations, and the relationships which form within them, are founded on social activism developed around specific political issues. Therefore, ignoring a request from a co-member could suggest a questioning of the association itself, and might strain relationships with co-members in general. Another possibility concerns the relationship between associational ties and members' identity. In this sense, requests coming from co-members recognise and reinforce the activist's identity, encouraging her/him to participate (Lim 2008).

The relevance of recruitment for the political participation process has also been recognised by Verba et al. (1995) in their Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM), which is arguably the dominant model of political participation in political science. Verba et al. (1995) focus on three factors which can account for political activity or inactivity. They argue that people may be politically inactive due to a lack of resources, a lack of psychological engagement with politics, or because they are outside the necessary recruitment networks. As such, the three components of the CVM are: resources – which are considered by Verba et al. (1995) the most critical element in their model – political engagement, and recruitment. The links between recruitment networks and political participation have already been exposed in the discussion of the Mobilisation Model. With respect to resources, Verba et al. (1995) stress the relevance for political participation of time, money, and civic skills (i.e., organisational and communication capacities). Verba et al.'s (1995) theorisation has been developed, in part, from the Socio-Economic Status Model (SES). According to the SES, people of higher socio-economic status (e.g., higher education, higher income, higher-status jobs, etc.) are more politically active. By taking into account resources, and by showing how their availability varies on the basis of socio-economic status, Verba et al. (1995) explain the SES and shed light on why some individuals are more active than others, and why certain people engage in specific political activities. For instance, education enhances political interest and

civic skills, and can facilitate forms of participation such as organising political initiatives. Income, on the other hand, provides the monetary resources needed for political activities such as donating money to a political candidate or party (Brady et al. 1995). In view of these considerations, Verba et al. (1995) conclude that disparities in citizens' political participation will remain as long inequalities in education and income persist.

The third component of the CVM is political engagement. Like political participation, political engagement has been theorised and defined in numerous ways. For instance, according to Boulianne (2009), political engagement includes behaviours which fall under the definition of political participation employed in this thesis (e.g., donations to a campaign or political group, working as part of a political campaign or political group). In the present research, political engagement is intended, as per Verba et al.'s (1995) conceptualisation, as citizens' psychological predisposition towards politics. Verba et al. (1995) identify four main measures of political engagement: political interest, political efficacy, political information or knowledge, and partisanship.

The academic literature recognises these measures as relevant drivers of political participation (Brundidge 2007; Brundidge and Rice 2009; Delli Carpini 2004; Kavanaugh et al. 2008). Partisanship refers to the identification with a political party and is an excellent predictor of many political orientations (Sani 1989; Verba et al. 1995). Abramovitz and Saunders (2006) explain how partisan choices are rooted in citizens' social identities and ideology. Bearing this in mind, the relationship between partisanship and political participation could be explained through the General Incentives Model: by participating in party-related activities, citizens give expressions to their beliefs and confirm their belonging to a specific group. Another component of Verba et al.'s (1995) political engagement index is political knowledge, which can be described as "the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory" (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993, p. 10). This knowledge can be obtained through formal education, discussion and news consumption (Kenski and Stroud 2006). Political knowledge is a consistent and established driver of political participation (Brundidge 2007; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993; Jung et al. 2011; McLeod et al. 1999; Verba et al. 1995), a relationship which is potentially explained by the fact that knowledge enables individuals to make reasoned civic decisions and thus increases their ability to participate (Galston 2001). Political efficacy encompasses two dimensions: internal efficacy, which refers to an individual's confidence in her/his ability to understand politics and to participate politically; and external efficacy, which indicates a person's belief in the responsiveness of the political system to her/his participation (Balch 1974; Delli

Carpini 2004). Kenski and Stroud (2006) provide an incentives-based explanation of how political efficacy impacts on political participation and argue that an individual is little encouraged to invest time and efforts in politics if he or she feels that it cannot make a difference.

Finally, the last measure of political engagement identified by Verba et al. (1995) is political interest. Among the four components of political engagement, interest in politics is, according to Verba et al. (1995), the strongest predictor of political activity. Research establishes that citizens who follow politics and care about what happens in the political arena are more politically active both offline (Brady et al., 1999; Finkel, 2002; Prior, 2005) and online (Barisione et al. 2014; Cremonesi et al. 2014; Kim and Khang 2014; Knobloch-Westerwick and Johnson 2014; Vraga et al. 2015). Unlike with other measures of political engagement, academics have thus far been unable to understand the origins of an individual's political interest, whether it is a stable personal trait or a more volatile and reactionary phenomenon, provoked by contingent political situations (Prior 2010).

There are a number of other factors associated with political participation which are highlighted in the academic literature. In terms of demographics, research finds that age, gender, education and occupation can impact on levels of political participation (see Lutz et al. – 2014 – for a recent discussion of the links between these variables and offline/online political participation). The ways in which education and occupation can influence political participation have been considered previously in the analysis of the SES. With respect to gender, several authors indicate the presence of a remarkably persistent gender gap in political participation, with males being generally more politically active than females (Atkeson and Rapoport 2003; Burns et al. 1997; Calenda and Meijer 2009; Coonway 2001). Hooghe and Stolle (2004) list a series of possible causes for such a gap, including the male-dominated culture of political associations which might inhibit women's participation, or the fact that women have less discretionary time or resources available to spend on political participation.

A resource approach can also help in explaining the links between political participation and age. The general pattern established by research is that political interest and participation increase with age (Holt et al. 2013; Mascherini et al. 2009; Putnam 2000). This generational gap has often been explained with considerations of life-cycle: young people participate less because they lack the resources that older people have accumulated during their lives (Nie et al. 1974; Zukin et al. 2006). Quintelier (2007) confirms the impact of the life-cycle,

identifying educational attainment as a determinant able to explain the larger differences in political participation between young and old. However, there could be another reason behind the young/old participatory gap. This has to do with the ways researchers tend to operationalise political participation, and their tendency to focus mainly on formal political activities such as voting, as done by Verba et al. 1995. In fact, as noted by numerous academics, young people tend to engage in more single-issue and informal types of political participation like wearing badges, signing petitions and taking part in demonstrations, while older people prefer to channel their participation through more formal routes, such as the ballot box and political parties (Melo and Stockemer 2014; Norris 2007; Quintellier 2007).

Finally, another factor relevant to this thesis which can influence political participation is media usage. With regards to traditional media (the links between political participation and the Internet are covered extensively in Section 3.1), research illustrates that the motivations behind media usage (e.g., entertainment, information, etc.) impact on political participation more than the choice of medium itself (Boulianne 2009; Dimitrova et al. 2014; Norris 2000). Researchers tend to agree that using media for information can prompt participation, whereas employing media for entertainment can limit it (Putman 2000; Shah et al. 2001; Sotirovic and McLeod 2004; Zhang and Chia 2006). This information/entertainment dichotomy is evident particularly in relation to TV usage. Research has shown that viewing TV for entertainment can inhibit political participation (Norris 1996; Prior 2005, 2007; Putnam 2000; Quintelir and Hooghe 2011), while watching television for informational purposes tends to encourage participation (Ho et al. 2011; Norris 1996; Putnam 2000; Wilkins 2000; Zhang and Chia 2006). The positive influence of informational media use on political participation is confirmed with regard to the press (Hoffman and Appiah 2008; Moy et al. 2005; Shah et al. 2001; Wilkins 2000; Zhang and Chia 2006) and radio (Johnson and Kaye 2013a).

This section has revealed how complex the phenomenon of political participation is. Incentives (i.e., outcome, process and ideological), resources (e.g., time and money), demographic variables (i.e., age and gender, education and occupation), political engagement, stimuli from one's environment and social network, and media usage are all identified in the literature as relevant determinants of political participation. All these factors must therefore be considered when examining the contributions of Facebook to this phenomenon.

2.2 The Internet: The Master Medium

Before moving on to assess how the Internet and SNSs can contribute to citizens' political participation, the features of these technologies and their influence on individuals and society are explored in this and the two following sections.

Chadwick (2006) defines the Internet as “a network of networks of one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many and many-to-one local, national and global information and communication technologies with relatively open standards and comparatively low barriers to entry” (p. 7). Because of this multifaceted nature, Selnow (1998) dubs the Internet the *master medium*. The Internet “incorporates text, sound, image, movement, and the potential for real-time interaction all in one package” (Kent and Taylor 2002, p. 31). Precisely “because it is a hybrid of the largely one-directional print, audio, and video media” which offers at the same time “the opportunity for a two-way communication feedback loop” (p. 510), Tedesco (2004) deems the Internet as revolutionary. Similarly, with reference to the integration of various modes of communication into one interactive network, Castells (1996) compares the technological transformation brought on by the Internet to the one fostered by the invention of the alphabet.

In his influential work, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Castells (1996) traces the history of this medium. The Internet originated in 1960 when, to prevent a breakdown of American communications in case of a nuclear war, the US Defence Department Advanced Research Project Agency created a network architecture that was not controlled by a central machine, but was formed by autonomous computers with numerous ways to link up. This structure was called ARPANET and became the foundation of the global and horizontal communication network which is today the Internet. The Internet went through various transformations and, as it grew, the need to be able to find and organise files and information within it became evident. A decisive breakthrough happened between 1990 and 1992, with the emergence of the World Wide Web (WWW) which has made the Internet what is today. The web can be described as a flexible network of networks within the Internet that allows the grouping of interests and projects. This enabled users to interact meaningfully and to overcome the time-costly browsing of pre-WWW Internet (Castells 1996).

Things have moved on since then, and people have witnessed the rise of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is an expression which was coined by the O'Reilly Media Group in 2003 during the planning for an Internet conference (Allen 2009). Web 2.0 started being adopted into popular commentary in 2005, yet businesses and web services considered to be exemplary of Web

2.0 – blogs, search engines, wikis, and SNSs – date from earlier times (Allen 2013). The main features of Web 2.0 can be easily understood if compared to the features of Web 1.0. Web 1.0 refers to the web between 1993 and 2003 while Web 2.0 is regarded as the web since 2003 (Berners-Lee et al. – 2001 – predict a further evolution of Web 2.0 to Web 3.0 or *Semantic Web*). According to Zhai and Liu (2007), Web 2.0 is not a simple update of Web 1.0, but is the symbol of the second revolution of Internet technologies, which brought about great technological innovation and introduced totally new notions such as personalisation and users’ participation. “Web 1.0 are mostly HTML pages viewed through a Web browser, while Web 2.0 are web pages, plus a lot of other ‘content’ shared over the web, with more interactivity” (Zhai and Liu 2007, p. 27).

Among the various features of Web 2.0, there are four which are particularly relevant to the present research. The first is the aggregation and availability of a vast amount of information, considered by Chadwick and Howard (2009) to be one of the most typical and revolutionary components of Web 2.0. The second feature is the notion of collective intelligence which refers to distributed networks of creators and contributors producing information commodities (Chadwick and Howard 2009). Examples of collective intelligence are free and open source software projects such as Firefox, and user-generated content sites such as Wikipedia. The third typical feature of Web 2.0 is the empowerment of Internet users who, encouraged by such a collaborative environment, play an active role in content creation and distribution (Pietrik 2010). The fourth feature is personalisation, which, according to Papacharissi (2009), is “the ability to organize information based on a subjective order of importance determined by the self” (pp. 236-237), and is the main component on which blogs and SNSs thrive.

A useful way to grasp the main features of the Internet is to look at this medium in opposition to traditional media such as TV, radio and the press. To describe the differences between traditional media and new media such as the Internet, Negroponte (1995) introduced the push-versus-pull media dichotomy. Traditional media, characterised by unidirectional communication, can be defined as *push media*, whereas the Internet is considered a *pull medium* due to the presence of a proactive and self-selecting audience (Chaffey 2007). Within the push media environment, media elites decide which content to publish and when and where such content will reach the audience (Holbert et al. 2010). Chaffee and Metzger (2001) illustrate the main principles on which pull media are built. They argue that pull media differ from traditional media as the user/receiver, rather than the sender, is in control of the communication process, and also because they are characterised

by interactivity rather than one-way communication. Spurgeon (2008) agrees with Chaffee and Metzger (2001) in identifying interactivity as one of the main characteristics of new media, as well as a key category of comparison between old mass media and new digital media. She observes how broadcast mass media involves a type of interactivity defined as *consultation*: they offer a modicum of control in that users select information from a predetermined menu of content. In contrast, new media are programmed to support different types of interactivity, extending the possibilities of conversational interaction and participation, and facilitating consumer productivity (Spurgeon 2008). Chadwick and Howard (2009) believe that interactivity is what makes the Internet a political tool unlike any other media. This stance is in part shared by Bimber et al. (2009) who recognise that, unlike earlier technologies such as television, telephony and newspapers which provide limited opportunities for citizens' interaction, collective agenda-building and decision-making, the Internet can have a different participative impact on politics.

The other major, politically relevant feature of pull media is the control the audience can exercise over transmission and consumption of content. The political consequences of users' empowerment and control are manifold, ranging from the rise of new forms and platforms for citizens' political participation to the publication and circulation of alternative non-elitist political stories (for a detailed account on the impact of the Internet on political information, see Section 3.2). Taking into account the active role of Internet users, Holbert et al. (2010) develop a fascinating comparison between pull and push media through the application of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). The ELM is a persuasion model developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), indicating that persuasion can happen through two different routes, depending on audience's motivation and ability. When recipients have both the ability and motivation to attend and consume persuasive messages, persuasion takes place through the central route. Otherwise it occurs through the peripheral route. When the persuasive process happens through the central route, it generates long-lasting effects, stronger attitude-behaviour associations, and greater resistance to counter-attitudinal messages (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Holbert et al. (2010) argue that the elite-based decisions relating to message construction and distribution which characterise push media often do not take into account audience's ability and motivation to consume political messages. In other words, the push media's top-down process tends mostly to activate the peripheral route of persuasion. In contrast, pull media are more prone to generating persuasion through the central route, as their users are in control – an element which guarantees a certain degree of motivation. Furthermore, the fact that the audience can chose

when, where and how to consume political messages facilitates individuals' ability to process and consume messages.

Another significant aspect that has to be taken into account to better grasp the contributions of the Internet to citizens' political participation is its spatial impact on communication. The Internet is a participatory medium facilitating collaboration and interaction among individuals, regardless of geographical boundaries (Milakovich 2010). Benkler (2006) believes that the Internet has strengthened connections between individuals on two spatial levels: Internet users connect more with individuals who are geographically distant without reducing their own local connections. Welman et al. (2003) share this idea, arguing that people use the Internet to strengthen locally-based social connectedness but also to develop and maintain global connectedness. Consequently, individuals can employ this medium to create a social network built around shared interests and identity across local and global boundaries. If early predictions suggested that the Internet would enable individuals to build space-free relationships in the cyberspace, current research on the contrary has shown that individuals use the Internet to connect with, rather than escape from, their immediate environment (Kim and Ball-Rokeach 2009). These findings are confirmed by Uslander (2004), who establishes that online communications occur mainly between people who already know each other offline.

The synthesis of the research thus far mentioned seems to paint an overwhelmingly positive picture of the Internet. However, not all scholars share such a techno-optimistic stance. For instance, Curran et al. (2012) adopt a critical approach to the study of the Internet. Bearing in mind the economic and societal contexts in which the Internet operates, Curran et al. (2012) play down its impact on the communication environment which, as they observe, is still dominated by big corporations and is used to further their profit-oriented interests. In line with Chadwick's (2006) remarks on the role of corporations and governments in the development of such a medium, Curran (2012a, 2012b) stresses that the Internet was not created as a public communication tool, highlighting the influence first of the military, and subsequently of corporations, in its development. He emphasises the commercialisation of the online environment and, considering that online users' personal data are being sold to certain providers, argues that the Internet has been transformed into a mass surveillance tool (Curran 2012a, 2012b). Similarly, Stanyer (2009) and van Dijck (2013) note how the Internet is dominated by corporate media chains. Accordingly, Fuchs (2014, p. 77) observes that "there is an asymmetry between the power of corporations and other powerful groups and the actual counter-power of citizens ... due to the fact that the ruling powers control

more resources, such as money, decision-making power, capacity for attention generation, etc.”

As the Internet has become more and more pervasive in everyday life, the aforementioned techno-enthusiasm has also been tempered by concerns over the potentially divisive aspect of digital technologies. Many authors address the issue of the *digital divide* and the exclusion of certain groups of the population (e.g., older people, women in certain societies, ethnic minorities, people with low levels of education and income, etc.) from fields of society like politics, education, community life and social relationships (Abbey and Hyde 2009; Barrantes and Galperin 2008; Bonfadelli 2002; Norris 2001; Rice and Kats 2003; van Dijk 2005, 2009). The digital divide refers to a gap in access to and usage of new forms of information technology (van Dijk 2009). Focusing on the case of Europe, van Dijk (2009) stresses that the access gap – with particular attention to computer access and Internet connection – is still a relevant issue today. In fact, even if such a gap is slowly closing, Northern European countries provide greater access to the Internet than Southern European ones (van Dijk 2009). This trend is confirmed in the two countries on which this thesis focuses. Recent reports reveal that 54% of the Italian population is online (Audiweb 2013) while, according to the Oxford Internet Institute, 78% of the UK population has access to the Internet (Dutton and Blank 2013). Likewise, a study by the European Commission (2013) shows that 87% of the British population use the Internet weekly, a figure above the EU average of 72%, with only 8% of the population having never used this medium (much lower than the EU average of 20%). The picture is different in Italy, where the usage of the Internet is much lower than the EU average, with only 56% of Italians reporting of using the Internet weekly, and 34% of the population having never used it.

The digital divide applies not only to access, but also to the ways digital technologies are used. In this sense, researchers talk of a *usage gap* (Bonfadelli 2002; van Dijk 2005, 2009). According to van Dijk (2009), the divisions created by uneven access to skills are greater than those caused by physical factors, and while physical access gaps are closing in the developed countries, the skills gaps continue growing. Taking this into consideration, he concludes that social and cultural differences in society are not only reflected but actually reinforced in computer and Internet use, and that those users who already hold a strong position within the society tend to benefit from the usage of digital technologies more than other individuals (van Dijk 2009).

Originally developed as part of a military project, the Internet has changed the lives of many people by making available a vast amount of information and facilitating and fostering communication. Because of its hybrid nature incorporating text, sound, image and the potential for real-time interaction, the Internet has been dubbed the master medium. It differs from traditional media in that users, rather than broadcasters, are in control of the communication process, and in that it is characterised by two-way rather than one-way communication. Many scholars have celebrated the contributions of the Internet to society. On the other hand, others have depicted it as a tool of surveillance dominated by big corporations, suited to their profit-oriented interests, or highlighted its tendency to favour those individuals who are already rich in terms of resources, consequently widening existing societal gaps. While scholars may disagree on the appropriate ways of perceiving such a medium or on the value of its contributions to society (*Internet optimists* vs *Internet pessimists*), what appears certain is that the Internet is a revolutionary medium which impacts on countless spheres of people's lives, including the sphere of politics.

2.3 Social Networking Websites: Self-Presentation, Network Composition and Privacy

Due to the widespread and rapid penetration of SNSs into diverse segments of the worldwide population, there has been a proliferation in the last few years of news stories and academic and non-academic studies dealing with these platforms. This trend seems destined to carry on, given how embedded SNSs have become in many individuals' daily routines, plus the consequences that the adoption of SNSs can have on disparate aspects of people's lives – ranging from less serious matters such as shopping and organisation of recreational activities, to more weighty affairs like the coordination of protest movements (boyd 2014; Marichal 2013; van Dijck 2013). SNSs can be defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd and Ellison 2007). The basic unit of SNSs is the user profile. Ancu and Cozma (2009) identify three main elements characterising SNS profiles: a description of the profile owner; the communication exchange between the profile owner and friends (i.e., “Comments” on MySpace, or “Wall” on Facebook); and the list of friends. According to Ancu and Cozma

(2009), this last element is the fundamental component of SNSs as it can facilitate the expansion of the network by displaying users' social connections.

SNSs normally have a central theme or cohering factor: common interests or contexts such as college (e.g., the first version of Facebook) or work (e.g., LinkedIn), or specific modes of sharing information, like photos (e.g., Flickr and Instagram), and can vary greatly in terms of design, openness, and customisability (Kim and Geidner 2008). In two reports of the Pew Research Center, Hampton et al. (2011) and Mitchell et al. (2013) indicate that there is a great deal of variation in how people use SNSs, with usage practices varying according to the types of person and SNSs in question. So far research has indicated that SNSs are used mainly for relational maintenance – to keep in touch with friends, but also to make new friends (Langstedt 2013; Lampe et al. 2006; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke 2008) – to establish, present, and negotiate identity (Liu 2007), for social surveillance (Joinson 2008), to share information and be entertained (Waters and Ackerman 2011).

As for the Internet (see previous section), several authors adopt a critical approach to the study of SNSs. In her thought-provoking book, *The Culture of Connectivity*, van Dijck (2013) considers SNSs as platforms falling under the category of social media – social media are “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated information” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p. 60). Influenced by Actor-Network theory (Latour 2005) and Castells' (2009) political economy approach, van Dijck (2013) regards social media platforms as both techno-cultural constructs and socio-economic structures. She proposes to look at distinct platforms as if they were microsystems strictly connected to each other, these interconnections manufacturing the *ecosystem of connective media*. Van Dijck (2013) explains that most social media platforms started as amateur-driven community services which facilitated user connectivity. They were networked media which did not connect people automatically. Half a decade later, these platforms have turned into global information and data mining corporations which engineer and exploit user connectivity. Such platforms are social in that they operate as online facilitators or enhancers of human networks, but they are also automated systems that fabricate and manipulate connections. This shift from *networked communication* to *platformed sociality* and from participatory culture to a *culture of connectivity* produced the ecosystem of connective media which became gradually dominated by few major platforms, i.e., Google, Facebook, Apple, and Amazon. Van Dijck's (2013) critical account is useful in understanding the environment in which services like Facebook and Twitter operate, how they have developed and how, in a

short period of time, they have deeply penetrated people's daily habits of communication and creative production.

In terms of research trends, reviews of academic articles focusing on SNSs indicate that there are four dominant themes in SNS research: impression management and friendship performance; network and network structure; bridging online and offline networks; and privacy (boyd and Ellison 2007; Zhang and Leung 2014). With regards to this last theme, due to technological advancements in electronic information collection and storage, the most frequently discussed aspect of privacy is the informational one (Goldie 2006). This aspect refers to "the claim of an individual to determine what information about himself or herself should be known to others ... this also involves when such information will be obtained and what uses will be made of it by others" (Westin 2003, p. 431). In relation to the informational dimension of privacy, Raynes-Goldie (2010) distinguishes between *social* and *institutional privacy*. The first concerns individuals' control over their personal information, while the second focuses on the exploitation of users' data by corporations such as Facebook (Raynes-Goldie 2010). SNSs disrupt the social dynamics of privacy (Grimmelmann 2009), challenging people's sense of control (boyd 2011). Barnes (2006) speaks of a *privacy paradox*, as research illustrates that users are concerned about their privacy but do not apply these concerns to their SNS usage (boyd and Hargittai 2010; Lewis et al. 2008). By disclosing personal information, SNS users can risk losing opportunities (e.g., jobs or scholarships) if they happen to discredit themselves in some way, or open themselves up to other dangers such as cyber and physical stalking, identity theft, and surveillance (Bohnert and Ross 2010; Gross and Acquisti 2005). Despite these potential consequences, users still disclose personal information online. The reasons behind such a paradox are not yet clear and it has been suggested that there are benefits to such SNS disclosures, such as peer acceptance and perceived popularity. It seems that increased social interaction may be more important to many than the potential privacy risks of disclosing personal information (Debatin et al. 2009; Donath and boyd 2004; Gross and Acquisti 2005; Lampe et al. 2007).

With respect to the network and network structure theme, it emerges that SNSs can expand the communicative channels through which people cultivate social relationships. Granovetter (1973) distinguishes between strong and weak ties in terms of the time and emotions invested in the relationship, and the reciprocity of communication between the considered participants. Examples of strong ties include friendships and familial relationships, whereas weak ties are typical of acquaintances. Considering such a distinction, Papacharissi (2011) explains that SNSs allow a user to connect with individuals both within the same network as

her/himself as well as in other networks, with varying levels of frequency and ties of various strengths (strong and weak), at both local and global levels. Donath and boyd (2004) suggest that SNSs enable people to maintain relationship with more individuals, an argument supported by Hampton et al. (2011), who establish that SNS users have larger networks than the average American. Because SNSs increase the number of weak ties an individual can maintain, they can be described as *social supernets* (Donath and boyd 2004). Ellison et al. (2011) also stress the impact of these platforms on network size and highlight how, in their lives, people frequently encounter others with whom they might want to reconnect – but due to social or logistical barriers they are unable to do so. In these cases, the potential benefits of social connection are outweighed by the costs of coordination. By facilitating interaction and enabling active (e.g., messaging) and passive (e.g., status updates) communication with very little effort, SNSs can lower the coordination costs and promote the maintenance (or re-engagement) of weak ties (Ellison et al. 2011).

Concerning the relationship between online and offline networks and the social and spatial connections between SNSs and the offline world, boyd and Ellison (2007) stress that the majority of SNSs principally support pre-existing social relations. Ellison et al. (2007) indicate that Facebook is employed to sustain existing offline relationships or to strengthen offline connections rather than to meet new people. Similarly, Lampe et al. (2006) determine that Facebook users search more for people with whom they have an offline connection than for complete strangers, and, in a subsequent study, they differentiate SNSs from online dating websites as they are most often used to connect with individuals people know from offline settings, rather than for meeting new people online (Lampe et al. 2007). However, these findings do not mean that SNSs are simply platforms supporting activities and interactions likely to happen offline anyway, or that SNSs do not increase the reach of communication messages. In fact, studies by Lampe et al. (2007) and boyd and Ellison (2007), while demonstrating an awareness that SNSs are generally employed to support existing relationships, do not deny the possibility of using these platforms to engage and interact in new ways with individuals already part of users' networks, or even to connect with new people. Likewise, Mendelson and Papacharissi (2011) highlight how SNSs link networks of individuals that may or may not share a *place-based connection* and, taking the case of Facebook groups as an example, Bittle et al. (2009) emphasise how SNSs can connect individuals with similar interests, independently of their location. Accordingly, it could be argued that, despite being originally created to support and strengthen already existing relationships, the customisability of SNSs has empowered their users to make the

technology their own and venture to use it in new ways. In other words, due to users' control, the current usages of SNSs are much more manifold and diverse than the ones originally intended.

As boyd and Ellison (2007) outline in their influential review, the final dominant theme in SNS research is that of identity management, as "SNSs constitute an important research context for scholars investigating processes of impression management, self-presentation, and friendship performance" (p. 10). Goffman (1959) could be considered the pioneer of the concept of selective self-presentation. Goffman (1959) adopts a dramaturgical approach to the study of self-presentation, describing the interactions between individuals and their audiences as *performance*, which he intends to mean: "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (p. 15). According to Goffman (1959), people consciously and unconsciously work to condition the way they are perceived, and in order to convey a positive impression of themselves they emphasise certain characteristics while concealing others.

The development and diffusion of digital technologies have had an important impact on the dynamics of self-presentation. New media allow people to present to highly selective versions of themselves, and SNSs are the latest networked platform enabling self-presentation to a variety of interconnected audiences (Mendelson and Papacharissi 2011). Papacharissi (2011) asserts that the appeal of SNSs derives from their provision of a stage for self-presentation and social connection. She argues that these platforms are tools to simultaneously present and promote individual and collective identities. SNSs provide props such as text, photographs, and other multimedia capabilities that facilitate self-presentation in a context where the performance is based on public displays of social connections or friends, which are used to authenticate identity and the self through association with social circles (Papacharissi 2011). Similarly, Liu (2007) explains how, through SNSs, individuals can express their individuality at the same time as connecting to others.

Papacharissi (2011) observes that the process of self-presentation is complicated in the context of SNSs, where private and public boundaries blur, and a variety of audiences which may have been separate offline are combined into a single one. This compels users to engage in a series of mini performances, resulting in a more malleable presentation of the self that can make sense to these multiple audiences (Papacharissi 2011). In this regard, boyd (2011) speaks of *networked publics*, which are publics restructured by networked technologies, and identifies three dynamics playing a central role in shaping them. The first is the presence of

invisible audiences as – unlike in offline interactions – the audience is not always known and visible. The second is the collapsed context in which the lack of social and spatial boundaries complicates the maintenance of separated social contexts and leads to a flattened, *collapsed audience*. The third is the blurring of the public and the private (the private refers to the realm of personal intimacy, while the public constitutes what is open, revealed, or accessible – Slater 1998; Weintraub 1997), which, combined with the lack of control over the different contexts, complicates the determination of the audience for one's disclosures

In order to cope with the emergence of this networked, collapsed and invisible audience and the blurring of the public and the private, individuals have developed a series of disclosure strategies (Vitak 2012). When generating a SNS profile, users have to make a series of choices and considerations in relation to how they want to present themselves, the audience they wish to view their self-representations and those who actually see them (boyd 2011). For these reasons users can opt to limit the visibility of their profile, ranging from truly public profiles to semi-public ones (boyd 2011), or apply a *lowest common denominator strategy*, not circulating messages that some audiences may perceive as problematic (Hogan 2010). Alternatively, users can decide to treat public channels as if they were more private, distributing messages to their entire network despite the wish to reach only specific people (Marwick and boyd 2011). Furthermore, focusing on Facebook, Brake (2014) shows that users may also choose to segregate their audiences by modifying their privacy settings, making their posts visible only to certain friends, or by using closed Facebook groups or private chats to communicate. Gross and Acquisti (2005) provide an example of these disclosure strategies, finding that students manage their Facebook identity and address their privacy concerns about unwanted audiences by: withholding personal information; altering the visibility of their information from within the site; creating alternative profiles; and using private messaging.

This section has illustrated the main features of SNSs, the great deal of variation in how people use these platforms, and the capability of SNSs to engineer and facilitate users' connectivity. It has identified four dominant themes which have emerged in SNS research: networks and networks' structure, the links between online and offline networks, self-presentation, and privacy. Furthermore it has indicated the following: the presence of a *privacy paradox*, describing the way in which users might worry about their privacy but still disclose a great deal of personal information; how these platform can operate as *social supernets* facilitating the management of larger networks of contacts; that SNSs mainly support offline-based connections, but can also connect people on the basis of interests,

independently of their locations; and how SNSs complicate the process of self-presentation due to the presence of *networked publics*.

2.4 Facebook: A Connective Platform

Among the various SNSs operating worldwide (e.g., Twitter, MySpace, Orkut, Instagram, Tumblr, etc.) this thesis focuses exclusively on Facebook. There are two main reasons behind this choice. The first relates to the popularity of Facebook which has become central in organising many people's social lives (Kirkpatrick 2010; Marichal 2013; van Dijck 2013). Launched in 2004 as a website for Harvard University students, Facebook has grown exponentially within a few years' time, reaching one billion active users in 2012 and enabling over 140 billion connections between friends (Facebook 2012). With over 30 million users in the UK and 20 million in Italy, Facebook is the most popular SNS in these two countries. In addition, considering the almost identical age composition of the British and Italian Facebook populations, this SNS appears the most suitable for a cross-national comparison (see Appendix A for Italy and UK Facebook statistics).

The choice of Facebook has also been influenced by considerations of the tools this SNS provides to its users. By taking advantage of a large range of communicative tools (e.g., instant and private messages, posts, events, groups, etc.), Facebook users can engage in a varied array of political activities – other SNSs have built-in limitations which prevent users from engaging in extensive political discussion, for instance Twitter posts are limited to 140 characters. As described by Caers et al. (2013), Facebook activity develops through two main pages: the homepage and the profile. On the profile page, called The Wall, users present themselves by providing basic information about themselves (e.g., where they live, place of birth, education, job, etc.), and can post pictures and status updates. Facebook allows users to interact with each other in a number of different ways: directly through wall posting and instant and private messages, or indirectly through status updates and posting notes and content (Vitak et al. 2011). Among the various forms of communication, wall posts are the most particular ones in that, as explained by Walther et al. (2011), they qualify as mass-personal communication (O'Sullivan 2005), which is – as the name suggests – a hybrid between mass and personal communication. Wall posts are addressed to the wall's "owner" but they can also be read by other people connected to her/him, so they are personal messages which are broadcasted for other to see (Walther et al. 2011).

The second page around which Facebook activity develops is the home, called the News Feed, where users are informed on the activities of their network (e.g., likes, groups joined, status updates, etc.). The News Feed is arguably one of the most innovative features of Facebook. It performs an information-based function, simplifying and accelerating the sharing of information by showing a constantly updated list of friends' activities, ranging from status updates to recently uploaded content, from posts to joined groups (Vitak et al. 2011). According to Ruchi Sangivi, News Feed product manager, "the News Feed highlights what's happening in your social circle on Facebook. It updates a personalized list of news stories throughout the day" (cited in Kirkpatrick 2010, p. 189). The News Feed drastically enhances the informative power of Facebook, which resultantly operates as a media platform generating and disseminating customised news stories.

The News Feed does not display all the activities of someone's network, but only those activities relevant to the user. The relevance of an activity is established through an algorithm, the EdgeRank, based on various parameters among which the most important one is users' previous behaviour (Kirkpatrick 2010). This means that if a user does not interact with a friend over a certain period of time, this friend's activities will stop appearing in the News Feed. Van Dijck (2013) illustrates that, through the EdgeRank, Facebook ranks the importance of friends and controls their visibility and, consequently, the visibility of the news, items, and ideas that they post. In this sense, Facebook is a typical example of the new ilk of social media platforms which, as explained in the previous section, do not only facilitate users' connectivity but also engineer and manipulate connections. Likewise, Marichal (2012) speaks of an *architecture of disclosure* and observes how the architecture of the site imposes choices on users that foster the dissemination and sharing of personal data, thus benefitting Facebook in terms of advertising revenues. In this sense, John (2013) contends that the notion of sharing is used by Facebook and other corporations in order to mystify the logic of profit and advertising on which their operations are based.

Concerns over the manipulation of the News Feed have grown among researchers and the general public since the publication of Kramer et al.'s (2014) experimental study, commissioned by Facebook itself. The experiment was conducted on 689,000 Facebook users over a period of one week, and manipulated the extent to which people were exposed to emotional expressions in their News Feed (a discussion on the ethical issues of such an approach can be found in Section 4.7). Kramer et al. (2014) establish that users who were exposed to more negative stories through their News Feed were more likely to write negative posts, and vice versa, demonstrating how Facebook can manipulate information circulating

within its environment. Considering that Facebook is essentially a business based on making profit through the free accumulation of participants' data (Langlois 2011), van Dijck (2013) questions the purpose of the EdgeRank – which could be that of personalising and optimising users' online experience but could also be that of promoting users' interlinking for profit generation. She raises the same questions in relation to the Share and Like buttons which have been effectively exported to other platforms, enabling users to distribute personal information to each other but also enabling the spreading of such information to third parties (van Dijck 2013).

In a review of academic articles dealing with Facebook, Caers et al. (2013) explain that because of the limited scope of many of these studies in terms of sample size and settings (most articles are based on US samples), and due also to numerous changes in the design and features of Facebook, more research is needed. With regards to the various usages of this specific SNS, research establishes that this platform is employed mainly to keep in touch with friends (Ellison et al. 2006; Joinson 2008; Lampe et al. 2008), to find information or seek advice (Vitak and Ellison 2012), to relieve boredom (Lampe et al. 2008), to maintain long-distance relationships, for game-playing/entertainment, photo-related activities, organising social activities, passive observations, and establishing new friendships (Tosun 2012). Lampe et al. (2006, 2008) illustrate that the ways people use Facebook remain stable over time, unless there are changes in the users' social contexts (e.g., going abroad to study) or in features of the service (e.g., the introduction of the News Feed), and indicate that Facebook has become more and more embedded in many people's lives. Focusing on students, Debatin et al. (2009) highlight that Facebook has become ingrained in students' daily routines. In this sense, they speak of a *routinisation* and *ritualisation* of Facebook which, they argue, is used not only for informational and entertainment purposes, but also out of habit because it has become part of people's everyday lives and routines (Debatin et al. 2009).

In an interesting study on Facebook abstention, Portwood-Stacer (2012) suggests that resistance to this SNS is driven by concerns about the power that the platform can hold over people's lives, with many non-users positioning "themselves as being above the 'time-wasting', 'artificiality', and 'narcissism' that they see as characterizing Facebook use" (p. 1051). The relevance that Facebook has for certain people is arguably rooted in its links to the offline sphere. Research finds that users employ the site mainly to articulate what Zhao (2006) labels as *anchored relationships*, namely offline-based online relationships (Lampe et al. 2006, 2008; Pempek et al. 2009; Reich et al. 2012; Subrahmanyam et al. 2008). In this

sense, Facebook exhibits what Gordon and Koo (2008) label as *net-locality* in that it often utilises lived geography as an organising principle for its network. As Gordon and Koo (2008) explain, “Facebook and its ilk ... reify traditional relationships built in physical spaces, while at the same time projecting the concept of physical connectivity into the space of flows” (p. 209). The net-locality is the original – but not the sole – principle for the development of Facebook social networks, as the proliferation of groups built on specific interests or issues demonstrates. It could be argued that Facebook started by connecting people who are geographically proximate, but then developed into a platform also allowing people to connect with one another over mutual interests. This SNS has progressively grown into a connective platform which allows individuals to manage a larger set of weak ties – the average size of a Facebook network is 320 friends – and to make ephemeral connections into something more long-lasting, supporting mainly relationships which originated offline, but also aiding the formation of online-based connections (Ellison et al. 2011). The connection between Facebook and the offline world is also reflected in users’ profiles. As opposed to anonymous settings such as online forums or chat rooms, Facebook is a *nonymous* environment (Zhao 2006) in which users are inclined to keep open and recognisable profiles which tend to represent an individual honestly (Ellison et al. 2011; Lampe et al. 2007). In theory, Facebook users can also create fake profiles, but because of the nonymous nature of anchored relationships (Zhao 2006), and given the presence on users’ profiles of information provided by their contacts (e.g., posted photos) and the system (e.g., number of friends), Facebook offers a context through which users’ real identity and personality can be inferred (Utz 2010).

In the complex array of factors determining Facebook activity, there is another significant intervening item: privacy. A study by Gross and Acquisti (2005) shows that, in the early years of Facebook, users were unconcerned about the privacy implications of their Facebook use. However, with the growth in popularity of this SNS, privacy threats have also increased, with users risking being stalked and harassed (Ybarra and Mitchell 2008), hacked (Greiner 2009), and falling victim to online identity theft (Laursen 2009). Research attests to an increase in the use of protective measures among Facebook users, including greater use of privacy settings (Debatin et al. 2009). Due to privacy concerns, users can end up limiting the amount of people they connect to through the website, or limiting their Facebook activity in general, and the presence of certain individuals or groups within their network can lead them to censor updates or use alternative channels (Vitak 2012; Vitak and Ellison 2012). Keeping in mind Raynes-Goldie’s (2010) distinction between social and institutional privacy

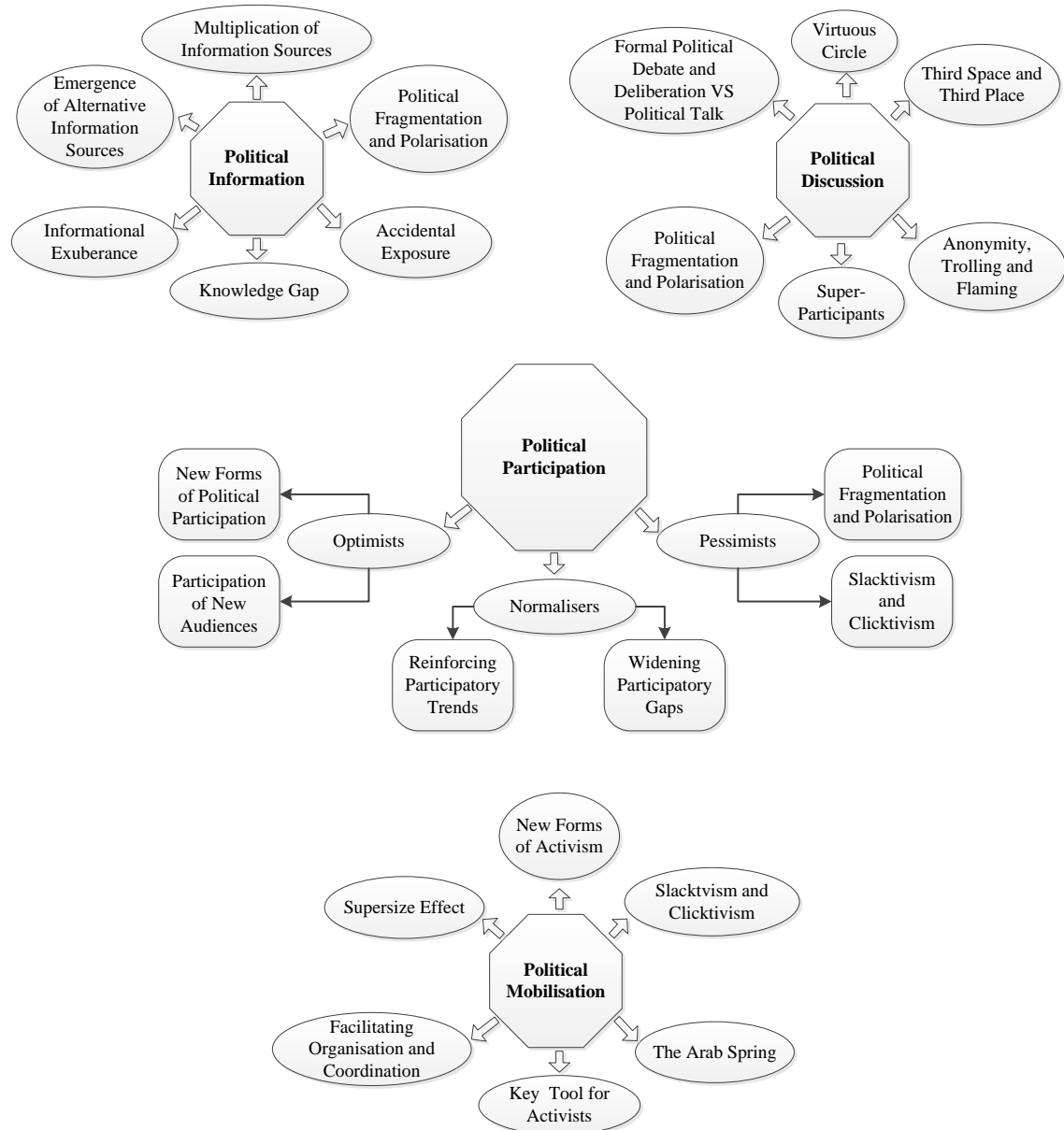
introduced in the previous section, Netchitailova (2012) indicates that Facebook users care about both aspects of privacy. While users can take measures to protect their social privacy such as the creation of alternative profiles or resorting to self-censorship, with regards to institutional privacy, the only solution is switching to platforms with better privacy policies. However, many users tend to be unaware of alternative platforms, or are reluctant to switch, for fear of remaining isolated (Netchitailova 2012). In this sense, Fuchs (2011) emphasises a tension between the social and the business sides of online platforms. He indicates Facebook as a typical case because, while on the one hand, this SNS claims to value its users' privacy and provides them with privacy settings to protect it, on the other hand, as a corporation, it collects its users' data and sells them to advertisers (Fuchs 2011).

In summary, among the various SNSs worldwide, Facebook is the one with the largest user base. This statistic applies to both Italy and the UK, the two countries on which this thesis focuses. Facebook provides its users with a wealth of communicative tools, and the most revolutionary component of this SNS is arguably the News Feed, which accelerates the sharing and circulation of information in this online environment. Facebook can be described as a connective platform facilitating – but also engineering – connections, and exploiting users' data, in order to generate profit. This SNS has gradually become more integrated in many people's everyday lives, providing a novel arena for self-presentation, relationship-maintenance and creation, and informational and entertainment activities. Facebook tends to support mainly anchored relationships, and due to its popularity and nonymous nature, it exposes users to privacy risks which can lead them to adopt protective measures and limit their Facebook activity.

3 INTERNET, SOCIAL NETWORKING WEBSITES AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION RESEARCH

This chapter reviews the academic literature investigating the links between the Internet, SNSs and political participation. It focuses first on political participation in general, then moves on to examine how digital technologies can contribute to specific forms of political participation such as the consumption of political information, political discussion, and political mobilisation.

Figure 2 – Internet and Political Participation Research: Conceptual Map



3.1 Political Participation: Optimists, Normalisers and Pessimists

As anticipated in Section 1.1, over the last decade there has been a proliferation of academic studies addressing the relationship between the Internet and politics (Chadwick and Howard 2009; Holtz-Bacha 2004; Wang 2007), with an increasing number of publications focusing on how this medium can affect citizens' political engagement and participation (Anduiza et al. 2009). Within this research strand it is possible to identify three main schools of thought that have generated a lively academic debate, still very much alive today. At one end of the continuum there are the optimists who speak of mobilisation and argue that the Internet promotes political participation by the following means: offering additional and convenient pathways to participation; generating new forms of political engagement and participation; and engaging audiences traditionally characterised by lower levels of political engagement and activity such as young people, individuals with lower socio-economic status or isolated citizens (Bachmann et al. 2010; Bachmann and Gil de Zúñiga 2013; Bengtsson and Christensen 2012; Borge and Cardenal 2010; Boullianne 2009; Copeland and Bimber 2015; Delli Carpini 2000; Gibson et al. 2005; Hamilton and Tolbert 2012; Jensen 2013; Johnson and Kaye 2003; Kavanaugh et al. 2008; Kim and Kim 2007; Krueger 2002; Morris and Morris 2013; Rojas and Puig-i-Abril 2009; Tolbert and McNeal 2003; Ward et al. 2003).

An example of a study endorsing the optimists' stance is that of Bengtsson and Christensen (2012), who, focusing on the case of Finland, propose that the Internet helps to mobilise a considerable segment of the population not engaged in politics. Hamilton and Tolbert (2012) confirm the mobilising potential of the Internet, suggesting that online information gathering and participation may encourage offline political participation and political interest also in those citizens who are uninterested in politics, with the Internet leading in certain cases to *accidental political mobilisation*. The role of information as a mobilisation agent for audiences characterised by limited levels of political activity is also highlighted by Rojas and Puig-i-Abril (2009), who establish that digital technologies offer additional pathways to information, stimulating political behaviours in the offline domain. Similarly, Morris and Morris (2013) show that in the early stages of the 2012 American presidential campaign, greater levels of access to the Internet were associated with greater political knowledge and engagement in individuals with low socio-economic status (see Section 2.1.2 for a discussion of the impact of SES on political participation). They attribute this link to the incidental learning which occurs during high-profile political events.

At the other end of the continuum, there are the pessimists who describe the Internet as a distracting medium which can contribute to civic decline by inducing citizens to engage in web activities, and taking them away from more meaningful forms of participation (Nisbet and Scheufele 2004; Scheufele and Nisbet 2002; Zhang and Chia 2006). This perspective has been inspired by Putnam's (1995, 2000) work on social capital. Putnam (2000) documents the erosion of social capital (see p. 19, for a definition of social capital) in the American society over the last few decades. Putnam (2000) argues that this decline is associated with an increase in the viewing of entertainment TV, an activity which displaces time that could be invested in civic or political activities. Several authors apply the time displacement hypothesis to the online environment, suggesting that the Internet generates passivity by absorbing energies that citizens would otherwise invest in political or civic activities (Diani 2001; Kraut et al. 1998; Lusoli and Ward 2004; Nie and Erbring 2002; Rash 1997; Turkle 1996). This notion has informed the pessimists' stance.

Finally, there is a third school of thought, the advocates of which are referred to in the academic literature as normalisers. The normalisers paint a picture in which the Internet has supplementary effects on political participation and engagement, reinforcing current participatory trends by aiding those citizens already interested in politics (Calenda and Meijer 2009; Calenda and Mosca 2007; Cremonesi et al. 2014; Dutta-Bergman and Chung 2005; Kenski and Stroud 2006; Kim 2006; Krueger 2006; Moy et al. 2005; Norris 2001, 2002; Polat 2005; Wang 2007). Online political activities are perceived in this sense as an extension of offline ones (Calenda and Mosca 2007), with the Internet, rather than operating as a game-changing technology, simply providing politically interested citizens with further ways to engage and participate (Tedesco 2004). In the normalisers' conception, even if the Internet has in part transformed the ways of doing politics, it has not changed who participates in politics (Bimber 2003). Among this group of scholars, there are some who perceive the reinforcement role of the Internet in a negative light. They believe that, by strengthening existing patterns of political engagement and participation, the Internet fortifies established power structures and widens the knowledge gap between politically active and less active citizens, making the rich richer and the poor poorer (Bimber 2001, 2003; Bonfadelli 2002; Brundige and Rice 2009; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993; Lindner and Riehm 2011; Schlozman et al. 2010; Tedesco 2004; Weber et al. 2003).

A distinction between the various digital tools could help to shed light on the debate between Internet optimists, pessimists and normalisers. In this sense, Dimitrova et al. (2014) argue that it is a mistake to think in terms of general influence, as the effects vary across different

digital tools. For instance, their study illustrates that consuming online news has no effect on offline political participation, whereas visiting party web sites and using social media for political purposes increase participation (Dimitrova et al. 2014). Likewise, focusing on news consumption, Yoo and Gil de Zúñiga (2014) stress the differential impact of Facebook and blogs, with the first amplifying inequalities between people of different socio-economic status, and blog-use associated with an increase in less-educated participants' political knowledge. However, even when such a distinction is made and research focuses specifically on SNSs, a mixed picture emerges, similarly to the work which has been produced relating to the Internet in general. Some scholars stress the positive impact of SNSs on political activity, whereas others minimise their mobilising capability, emphasising their tendency to reinforce existing participatory patterns or highlighting their limited or even negative influence on political participation.

A pioneering study within this subject area is that of Williams and Gulati (2007) who investigate the relation between candidates' number of Facebook friends and their vote share in 2006 US Midterm elections. They establish that Facebook support has a significant effect on candidates' final vote share and suggest that SNSs are capable of affecting the electoral process. However, Williams and Gulati's (2007) study is somewhat limited in that it focuses exclusively on the aggregate level, without examining and explaining the processes behind users' voting behaviour. This approach has been criticised by Kim and Geidner (2008) who attempt to fill this gap. Kim and Geidner (2008) indicate that SNS usage enhances voting probability by increasing individual and collective voting rewards such as social capital, civic duty and political efficacy, and that these platforms are particularly relevant for young voters who are, in general, relatively alienated from politics. These two studies identify a positive relationship between SNS usage and voting but, by concentrating solely on voting, they leave the rest of the political participation spectrum untouched. Other more comprehensive investigations confirm that SNSs can aid and promote citizens' political participation (Baek 2015; Bond et al. 2012; Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012; Halpern and Lee 2011; Holt et al. 2013; Towner 2013; Xenos et al. 2014). Replicating what Bachman et al. (2010) find with respect to online media in general, Holt et al. (2013), Towner (2013) and Xenos et al. (2014) all provide evidence in support of the mobilisation hypothesis and argue that SNSs could serve as a leveller of political participation between younger and older citizens, as youths' high usage of SNSs can compensate for their limited usage of traditional media to obtain political information.

In contrast to these findings, there are other studies which paint a picture of limited (Baumgartner and Morris 2010; Valenzuela et al. 2009) or even negative effects (Ancu and Cozma 2009; Fenton and Barassi 2011) of SNSs on political participation. In their study exploring the reasons why members of the public visited MySpace profiles of 2008 US primary candidates, Ancu and Cozma (2009) determine that users are attracted to MySpace mainly because they desire social interaction with other like-minded individuals, a type of usage negatively related to campaign involvement in the study. Fenton and Barassi (2011) provide an interesting explanation of the negative influence that SNSs can have on political participation. They contend that in assessing the political potential of SNSs, differences between individual and collective forms of participation have to be considered. Fenton and Barassi (2011) argue, in fact, that SNSs tend to foster individualism and personal affairs, disconnecting individuals from the public terrain of political participation and guiding them away from the communality of collective political endeavour in favour of “narratives of the self and forms of self-representation” (p. 190). Other authors such as Baumgartner and Morris (2010) and Valenzuela et al. (2009) reject the idea that SNSs negatively affect political participation, suggesting instead that these platforms have limited or no effects on political participation. Baumgartner and Morris (2010) find that SNSs did not increase political interest and participation in young people who employ these platforms mainly to seek out supporting views. Similarly, focusing on the case of Facebook, Valenzuela et al. (2009) stress the limited contributions of SNSs to youths’ political participation, arguing that these platforms are not the most effective tools to counteract youths’ political disengagement.

Finally, there are a number of other investigations which back up the normalisers’ stance and establish that politically engaged individuals get the most from SNSs (Carlisle and Patton 2013; Gustafsson 2012; Mascheroni 2012; Rainie and Smith 2012; Vesnic-Alujevic 2012; Vitak et al. 2011; Yoo and Gil de Zúñiga 2014). Focusing on Facebook, Carlisle and Patton (2013) find that during the 2008 US primary and general elections, people showed a limited engagement in political activity via Facebook, and that political interest strongly influenced Facebook political participation. These findings are supported by Vesnic-Alujevic (2012) and Gustafsson (2012). The first indicates that the more people were involved in politics offline, the more they participated politically through their Facebook profile pages. Similarly, distinguishing between members and non-members of interest organisations, Gustafsson (2012) establishes that members consider SNSs valuable tools for participation. In contrast, non-members generally refrain from sharing political views with their SNS

friends and, despite being exposed to political content and requests for participation, prefer to remain passive (Gustafsson 2012). Finally, there is Vitak et al.'s (2011) study which is arguably one of the most comprehensive efforts in SNS and political participation research. Vitak et al. (2011) establish that Facebook can provide young people with a space to express their political opinions, to search for political information, and to engage in political discussions. Vitak et al. (2011) also recognise the potential of this specific SNS as a political tool, stressing the strong link between Facebook political activity, political interest and offline political participation. In this sense, their research can be placed in the normalisers' group, suggesting that those who are already politically engaged seek multiple outlets for their political behaviours and that SNSs alone do not drive previously inactive individuals to political participation.

As illustrated in this section, contrasting evidence characterises research examining the contributions of the Internet and SNSs to political participation, with three schools of thought, i.e., optimists, normalisers, and pessimists, generating an intense academic debate. Among them, the normalisers' stance has found the most support in terms of academic research, but the presence of many pessimist and optimist studies demonstrates that there is no conclusive evidence in this regard. Such a state of affairs calls for further research in this area and highlights the need of new approaches (a potentially fruitful one is presented in Section 4.1) examining the links between digital technologies and citizens' political participation.

3.2 Political Information: Multiplication of Sources, Fragmentation and Exposure to Political Difference

Section 2.1.1 has highlighted that political participation is a complex phenomenon which encompasses a wide range of participatory activities. The multifaceted nature of political participation is also stressed by Vedel (2007), who proposes three axes for making sense of the political uses of the Internet, and distinguishes between information, discussion and mobilisation. Taking into account such a distinction, this section considers the links between the Internet, SNSs and political information, while the next two sections deal with political discussion and mobilisation respectively.

Regarding the information axis, the contributions of the Internet are certainly manifold. According to McNair (2009), two main areas of the information environment have been

particularly affected by digital technologies. The first relates to the flow of information which has been heavily accelerated, while the second concerns the access to information, with the online medium offering countless choices and opportunities (McNair 2009). Citizens searching for political information can access online innumerable and diverse sources, ranging from political institutions, candidates and news organisations, to bloggers, video-sharing websites, non-profit organisations and private citizens (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Kenski and Stroud 2006; Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2012). Accordingly, Cavanaugh (2000) calls the Internet a *political wall-mart*, a single resource from which it is possible to obtain a wide variety of political information.

Tewksbury and Rittenberg (2009) consider these changes in the information environment as an information revolution, and highlight their political consequences. They note that citizens are more and more likely to use the Internet to obtain political information and how, online, politically engaged citizens can take advantage of the richness of information and become more effective than ever in terms of political participation (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2009). Other academics go even further and, considering the informative capabilities of the Internet, deem this medium as a potentially *democratic device*. For instance, Milakovich (2010) regards the increase of political information triggered by the Internet as an opportunity for the development of a more informed electorate, which is widely considered an essential prerequisite for a well-functioning democracy (Frey and Stutzer 2006; Gans, 2004; Sotirovic and McLeod 2004). Similarly, Fallows (2002) asserts that the Internet benefits democracy by expanding people's horizons, exposing them to new ideas. In this sense, digital media have taken on a double role and, if on one hand they complement traditional media, on the other hand they can also operate as alternative information sources (Calenda and Mosca 2007). Alternative media can be defined as "any media that are produced by non-commercial sources and attempt to transform existing social roles and routines by critiquing and challenging power structures" (Atkinson 2006, p. 252). Alternative media aim to subvert the *hierarchy of access* characterising mainstream media (Atton 2002), and to fill the cultural and social gaps caused by the mainstream blockage of public expression (Downing 2001). The Internet has lowered the production and distribution costs for alternative media, making public affairs information more diverse and diffuse, and allowing such media to reach a wider audience (Leung and Lee 2014).

The current transformations in the media and information environment, however, are not only due to the increase in available information but also to a surge in demand for such information. According to Bennett and Iyengar (2008), the Internet has played a decisive

role in this sense by shaping an information greedy culture, with citizens increasingly expecting accuracy, accountability and transparency from information sources, whether private or public. The Internet, with its limitless capacity for content diversity and quantity (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2012), is the engine driving such a demand, facilitating the development of an open information environment (Milakovich 2010).

Furthermore, digital media have, in part, changed the relationship between people and news. Hardy et al. (2009) observe that digital technologies have not only multiplied the number of information sources and the amount of available information, but they have also transformed the nature of information by providing increasingly interactive and networked content. The Internet has become a central news source and transformed the news experience in the following ways: it has made news portable, with some citizens accessing news on-the-go through their mobiles; news is now personalised, with Internet users frequently customising their homepage to include news from specific sources and about topics of interest; and news is also participatory, with some users contributing to the creation of news and its dissemination (Purcell et al. 2010). However, Jackson (2008) highlights how such participatory trends are somewhat counteracted by mainstream news outlets, which feed citizens a diet of news that encourages them to be *apolitical spectators*, and possibly deter them from looking for arenas like the Internet in which active engagement is celebrated.

With respect to the potential participatory nature of online information, Chadwick (2012) introduces the concept of *informational exuberance* through which he aims to capture “the willingness of non-elites to contribute to the collective production, reworking, and sharing of media content” (p. 40). An example of informational exuberance is the so called *citizen journalism* which includes practices such as blogging about current affairs, posting eyewitness commentary, sharing, linking, rating and commenting on news material posted by other users or news outlets (Goode 2009). Most of these practices did not start with the Internet – for instance, there are news reports on TV which include eyewitness footage taken with mobile phones – but have certainly proliferated in the online environment. Social cues and personal recommendations today have a strong influence on the way people consume news online and on the sources they select (Messing et al. 2011), to the extent that news consumption is becoming a shared social experience, a trend influenced by the ascent of mobile connectivity, blogs and SNSs (Purcell et al. 2010).

With regard to the specific case of SNSs, research attests to the relevance of these platforms as information sources and finds that one of the main motivations behind their usage is the

gathering of political information (Baresch et al. 2011; Hermida et al. 2011; Messing and Westwood 2012; Mitchell et al. 2013; Rainie and Smith 2012; Rainie et al. 2012; Vickery 2009; Weeks and Holbert 2013). Messing and Westwood (2012) describe SNSs as *news aggregators*, in that they collect contents coming from a number of sources into a single location, a space in which news organisations and journalists – but also general users – operate as content distributors (Weeks and Holbert 2013). In a recent report from the Pew Research Center, Mitchell et al. (2013) find that the more time people spend on Facebook, the more likely they are to obtain news, and that some users, particularly young people, are exposed through SNSs to news that otherwise they might not get. Similarly, in Vickery's (2009) qualitative study, participants cite Facebook as a major source of political information, many of them claiming to have discovered new sources of news through the links their friends post on this SNS. According to Vickery (2009), these results are indicative of a larger trend in which an increasing number of people are using SNSs as news aggregators.

A particularly optimistic picture of the impact of the Internet and SNSs upon the political information environment has emerged from these first paragraphs. A voice outside this optimist chorus is Polat (2005), who identifies five factors limiting the contributions of the Internet to the creation of a more informed society. The first factor is the *information overload*. Polat (2005) stresses that humans can only process a limited amount of information. She refers to Percy Smith (1995), who argues that wide availability of information could negatively impact democracy, as citizens may feel overwhelmed and become dependent on external institutions to organise and understand such information.

The second factor is the limited range of arguments resulting from media gatekeeping. Considering how in the US major media companies such as Time Warner and AOL have invested heavily in the web, and how search engines favour certain websites rather than others, Polat (2005) observes that the Internet may not be completely immune to the power structures operating in the offline world. By the same token, Brundidge (2007) points out the elitist nature of the online information environment which she believes to be dominated by a limited number of agenda setters (for a further discussion of the elitist character of the Internet see Section 2.2). However, Brundidge (2007) also recognises that these online agenda setters are not necessarily associated with major political parties and media and, consequently, do not always duplicate offline power structures.

The third and fourth factors identified by Polat (2005) are the difference among Internet users in terms of motivations and web usages (other scholars talk in this sense of usage gap as discussed in Section 2.2), and citizens' unequal distribution of resources. In order to back up her argument, Polat (2005) considers the study of Shah et al. (2001) which shows that people with low education tend to use the Internet mainly for entertainment, while more educated people employ the Internet more for informational purposes. In the same vein, Jackson (2008) observes that if on one hand there has never been more information available to interested citizens, on the other hand it has never been easier for unengaged users to avoid political content. Hence, Polat (2005) argues that the Internet tends to benefit people who are already in a better position in terms of skills, income and physical access to political information. The third and fourth limitations identified by Polat (2005) are linked to Tichenor et al.'s (1970) *knowledge gap* theory. In agreement with van Dijk (2012), who notes that due to the Internet the information elite is likely to grow, Bimber (2003) applies such a theoretical framework to the online environment and concludes that the Internet could widen the gap between *information rich* and *information poor* (this position is shared by other scholars falling within the normalisers group, see Section 3.1).

Finally, Polat (2005) recognises a fifth factor, also acknowledged by Bimber (2003), limiting the contributions of the Internet to the creation of a more informed citizenry. This factor is the high degree of *selective exposure* characterising the online environment. The alleged tendency of the Internet to promote selective exposure is an area of concern for a number of scholars who believe that this phenomenon will progressively lead to a more fragmented, polarised and, consequently, less-informed electorate (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Habermas 2006; Polat 2005; Sunstein 2001). The theory of selective exposure finds its roots in Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory and suggests that to elude cognitive discomfort, individuals tend to expose themselves to pro-attitudinal information while avoiding conflicting perspectives (Klapper 1960). To date, these theoretical claims have received mixed support (Brundidge 2007). As reported by Holbert et al. (2010, pp. 19-20), there are studies challenging the premise that ideological homogeneity is psychologically desirable (Frey 1986), and arguing that selective exposure does not necessarily lead to the avoidance of attitude-discrepant information (Chaffee et al. 2001; Garrett 2009; Webster 2007). In the last decade, the changes which have occurred in the information environment have attracted renewed attention to the issue of selective exposure, with numerous researchers finding that the Internet tends to foster this phenomenon (Adamic and Glance 2005; Bimber and Davis 2003; Nie et al. 2010; Stroud 2008; Tewksbury and Rittenberg

2009). Adamic and Glance (2005) study the links among the posts of a series of blogs, showing that Liberal blogs link primarily to other Liberal blogs, while the opposite happens for Conservative blogs. Similarly, Stroud (2008) establishes that people's political beliefs relate to their media exposure, both online and offline. These findings are confirmed by Nie et al. (2010), who demonstrate that online consumers expose themselves to news content in line with their own political views.

Along the same lines, Bimber and Davis (2003) analysed the audiences of campaign websites during the 2000 US presidential election, concluding that when compared with television and newspapers, the Internet provides the conditions most conducive to selective exposure. According to them, this is due to two structural aspects of this medium: the presence of a pro-active and self-selecting audience; and the abundance of information and the consequent proliferation of media choices (Bimber and Davis 2003). The active role of the audience in content selection and consumption is, in fact, a necessary condition to the occurrence of selective exposure (Dutta-Bergman and Chung 2005), with individuals who tend to select information strengthening their existing positions (Anduiza et al. 2009). In relation to the proliferation of media choices, Bennett and Iyengar (2008) talk of a shift from *information commons* to *information stratamentation*. They argue that fifty years ago it was possible to talk of *information commons*, as the information provided by news organisation was extremely homogeneous and standardised. The rise of the Internet and the resulting proliferation of information sources have led to the fragmentation of the information environment. This new *information regime* (Bimber 2003) is characterised by *information stratamentation*, namely a combination of segmentation and fragmentation of information (Bennett and Iyengar 2008).

Tewksbury and Rittenberg (2009) believe that specialisation, segmentation, fragmentation and polarisation are inter-related phenomena. They describe specialisation as the tendency of some individuals to focus on certain topics, or the disposition of websites to tailor their content to specific audiences. In their view, the specialisation of news exposure can cause the segmentation of audiences and, ultimately, fragmentation which is defined as "the lack of widespread public exposure to some content of interest" (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2009, p. 196). They argue that a fragmented information environment is prone to polarisation which occurs when audience groups consume idiosyncratic content. Tewksbury and Rittenberg (2009) develop an interesting argument and claim that by providing "too much freedom", by enabling users to focus on content and activities which are relevant to them, the Internet can lead to selective exposure and the exclusion of counter-attitudinal political information.

However, despite many speculations and theorisations, the relationship between the Internet and exposure to politically-diverse information is, today, still unclear. As shown, some research supports the argument that the Internet increasingly exposes individuals to pro-attitudinal perspectives. On the other hand, there are many other investigations reporting that online users not only seek out attitude-consistent information, but also consume more attitude-discrepant information (Garrett 2009; Garrett et al. 2013; Johnson and Kaye 2013b; Jun 2012, Messing et al. 2011). In support of this stance, there is a strand of research asserting that Internet users can break away from the dynamics of selective exposure through accidental exposure to information. Brundidge (2010) speaks of *inadvertency* and argues that in the online environment, individuals are exposed to more political difference than they would be otherwise, even if only inadvertently. The *inadvertency thesis* is supported by several scholars (Baum 2003; Cornfield 2005; Lev-On 2008; Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009). For instance, Baum (2003) explains that during high-profile political events, people with limited political knowledge can learn more about politics simply by stumbling across information while browsing the Internet for entertainment or social networking. Similarly, Rainie et al. (2005) find that over a third of Internet users, rather than getting campaign news through a direct search, obtain this information accidentally, while surfing the web for different purposes. In the same vein, Tewksbury et al. (2001) observe that Internet users can acquire information in an incidental fashion, as “a byproduct of their other online activities” (p. 533).

The issue of selective exposure has also been examined regularly in research focusing on SNSs. As with studies related to the Internet, research has produced contrasting findings in relation to these platforms. Messing and Westwood (2012) establish that on SNSs, the social endorsement of political stories coming from politically heterogeneous contacts can reduce partisan selective exposure. In line with Ismail and Abdul Latif’s (2013) study, Messing and Westwood (2012) explain this finding with the fact that SNS users operate in a context which emphasises social value over partisan affiliation. Bae (2013) and Lee et al. (2014) confirm that SNS usage can promote the exposure to political difference, with the Lee et al. (2014) attributing these findings to the capability of these platforms to support network heterogeneity. Vickery (2009), Kim (2011) and An et al. (2011) also establish that SNSs can expose users to cross-cutting opinions, but provide an alternative explanation for their results, ascribing them to the accidental exposure to information that can occur in these environments. For instance, An et al. (2011) find that on Twitter there is a non-negligible amount of indirect media exposure which expands the diversity of news that users are

exposed to, while Vickery (2009) explains that on Facebook people no longer have to seek out information, but rather the information is presented to them whenever they access the site. These findings, however, do not exclude the possibility of the occurrence of selective exposure on SNSs. For instance, in a qualitative content analysis of Facebook posts, Meyer (2012) observes that in the US, Republicans and Democrats have built highly partisan social media communities. Similarly, Weeks and Holbert (2013) show that, on SNSs, users can obtain information from both consonant and dissonant sources, and disseminate this information to other consonant or dissonant users.

This section has highlighted how, first the Internet, and then SNSs, have revolutionised today's information environment. Digital technologies have multiplied the number of information sources, complementing traditional media but also operating as an alternative to them. In addition, they have transformed the nature of information and made the information experience portable, personalised, participatory and social, thereby transforming the way individuals relate to sources of information in general. The main criticisms levelled against the Internet regarding its impact on information are related to the so-called information overload, to the increase of knowledge gaps between *information rich* and *information poor*, and to the creation of echo-chambers where users interact only with like-minded individuals. These criticisms are supported by numerous studies, but also contradicted by many others showing that: users value the diverse array of choices offered by the Internet; individuals can obtain political information they would not have got otherwise through the Internet and SNSs; and people can be exposed online to political difference, either deliberately or inadvertently.

3.3 Political Discussion: Superparticipants, Third Spaces, Flaming and Echo-Chambers

This section addresses how the Internet and SNSs operate with respect to political discussion, the second axis identified by Vedel (2007) in his categorisation aiming to facilitate the assessment of the political uses of digital technologies.

Before assessing the links between the Internet and this phenomenon, a clarification of what is intended in this thesis as political discussion is in order. Schudson (1997) argues that not all political conversations are meaningful for democracy, and that political discussion should be persuasive, informative and focus on goals, issues, problem-solving, and public interests.

In contrast with such a stance, a more wide-ranging definition of political discussion is employed in the present research. This choice has been inspired by Papacharissi (2010) and her insightful book, *A Private Sphere*. Papacharissi (2010) observes that in the online environment the expression of political opinion overshadows the deliberation of public issues. She attributes this trend to the nature of cyberspace, which is at the same time private and public, and to the shift from traditional institutionalised politics to what Bennett (1998) describes as lifestyle politics (see Section 1.2). According to Papacharissi (2010), civic engagement has developed across converging and interlinked social, cultural, economic and political planes, and is shaped by citizens' personal agendas. The private sphere is a sphere that connects "the personal to the political, and the self to polity and society" (Papacharissi 2010, p. 164). In line with these considerations, this thesis places not only formal political debates and deliberation, but also more casual political conversations, under the umbrella of political discussion.

With respect to formal political debate and deliberation, a rich and diverse academic literature has developed, tackling such a notion from multiple perspectives. Some authors focus on the process and on the conditions prompting deliberation (Briand 2006; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Littlejohn and Domenici 2001), while others consider the outcomes of the deliberative process (Fischer 2003; Fishkin and Luskin 2005; Price et al. 2002) and its contribution to democracy (Bohman 1996; Dewey 1927; Habermas 1989; Dryzek 2000). Evans (2001) describes deliberation as a "particular form of dialogue associated with democratic decision making" (p. 776). In a deliberative process, actors operate together, they mutually respect and listen to each other, present their arguments reasonably and are willing to revise their initial stances (Gutmann and Thompson 1996).

As previously said, more casual and less structured political conversations are also considered under the banner of political discussion in the present research. These types of conversation can be described as *political talk*, which refers to a "non-purposive, informal, casual, and spontaneous political conversation voluntarily carried out by free citizens, without being constrained by formal procedural rules and predetermined agenda" (Kim and Kim 2008, p. 54), and to "a public-spirited way of talking whereby citizens make connections from their individual and personal experiences, issues and so forth to society" (Graham and Hajru 2011, p. 20). Wyatt et al. (2000) establish that political matters are not discussed in isolation from other topics and that political and personal conversation form a continuum with one another. Wyatt et al. (2000, p. 88) highlight how several academics question the role of politics in everyday discussion (Eliasoph 1998; Noelle-Neumann 1993;

Schudson 1997). Schudson (1997), for instance, argues that politics is a complicated and divisive topic and often avoided in informal, casual conversations. In contrast, other political scientists such as Tocqueville (1969), Dewey (1927) and Barber (1984) contend that political discussion and everyday conversation mingle together, with interlocutors shifting between aimless chat about personal issues and the discussion of political subjects. Drawing on the same theoretical premise, Oldenburg (1999) develops the notion of *third place*, “a generic designation for a great variety of public spaces that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals’ and is a core setting of informal public life” (p. 16). According to Oldenburg (1999), third places such as English pubs or French cafés strengthen citizenship, and are central to the development of communities and the democratic process.

With regards to the impact of the Internet on political discussion, Levine (2000) draws attention to a shift that occurred at the start of the new millennium, with an increasing number of individuals moving to computer-mediated discussion spaces such as newsgroups and forums. Online discussion differs from its offline counterpart in that it tends to be written, asynchronous, anonymous (Lin, 2008), and simultaneously interpersonal and broadcast (Himmelboim et al. 2009). The popularity and diffusion of digital tools for the discussion of political matters lies on certain archetypical assets of these technologies, such as the enormous amount of retrievable information available online (Papacharissi 2002). In this regard, Stromer-Galley (2003) finds that one of the main reasons individuals enjoy online political discussion is that they can obtain through this means new information which would otherwise be difficult to acquire. Online, people can learn about a political topic of which they know little, but also obtain a deeper understanding of issues about which they are knowledgeable, learn about other people’s opinions, and better understand their own political beliefs and views (Stromer-Galley 2003). The online medium seems to facilitate the contribution of low-status participants (Rice 1993), and offers citizens a certain flexibility, enabling them to reach geographically distant interlocutors (Papacharissi 2002) and to fit political discussions within their daily schedules (Hauben and Hauben 1997).

In an analysis of almost 40,000 authors in 20 political Usenet newsgroups, Himmelboim et al. (2009) speak of *discussion’s catalysts* and find that “the flow of information from the content creators to the readers and writers is mediated by a few individuals who act as filters and amplifiers” (p. 771). These results support Lazarsfeld et al.’s (1948) Two-Steps Flow theory, according to which a limited number of opinion leaders play a central role in the flow of information from mass media to audience. The concept of *discussion’s catalysts* is

consistent with the typology of *superparticipation* developed by Graham and Wright (2014). In line with several empirical studies indicating the presence of a minority dominating online political discussion (Awan 2007; Davis 2005; Wright 2006), Graham and Wright (2014) confirm that *superparticipants* (in their categorisation they distinguish between *superposters*, *agenda-setters* and *facilitators*) quantitatively dominate online debates. Arguably, the more stimulating and novel findings of Graham and Wright's (2014) investigation come from the qualitative content's analysis of superparticipants' posts. In contrast to the negative frame through which the presence of a dominant minority is often addressed (Dahlberg 2001), they establish that most superparticipants perform a positive role, as they do not attempt to stop other users from posting (i.e., *curbing*), or attack them (i.e., *flaming*), but undertake a range of positive functions such as helping other users, replying to debates, summarising longer threads for new discussants and engaging in rational critical debates.

In relation to the specific case of SNSs, Kushin and Kitchener (2009) recognise that these platforms have created unprecedented opportunities for human-to-human interaction and grown into a unique arena for online discussion. Likewise, Bae (2013), considering the 2012 South Korean presidential election, highlights the growing centrality of SNSs as a venue for citizens' political conversations. In relation to Facebook, Roberts and Andersen (2009) demonstrate that, in the context of 2008 US presidential elections, this SNS was for college students a major forum for political discussion. Furthermore, in a discourse analysis of the Facebook page "Join the Coffee Party Movement," Mascaro and Goggins (2011) establish that significant deliberative discourse among members emerges in this open public space.

Grounded in a critique of Oldenburg's *third place*, Wright (2012) emphasises the relevance of non-deliberative forms of online political discussion and introduces the concept of *third spaces*, described as "non-political online spaces where political talk emerges" (p. 5). One of the main differences between third place and third space is that the latter does not privilege place-based communities. Wright (2012) highlights how research investigating online political discussion tends to focus mainly on formal and explicit political spaces such as government-run forums or parties' websites, ignoring the spaces where the majority of talk between "ordinary" citizens is likely to happen. In line with Papacharissi's (2010) observations reported at the beginning of this section, due to the decentralisation characterising political communication today, which is linked to the rise of Bennett's (1998) lifestyle politics, Graham and Hajru (2011) advocate for the adoption of a "porous approach to the 'political' in political talk" (p. 19) and stress the need to examine third spaces. Investigations focusing on political talk on third spaces suggest that it can be reciprocal,

reflexive and deliberative, holding the potential to mobilise citizens and lead them to political action (Graham 2010, 2012; Graham and Hajru 2011; Graham and Wright 2014). A less positive picture is painted by Jackson et al. (2013) in a quantitative and qualitative analysis of three general interest, UK-based online discussion forums, i.e., HotUKDeals, Digitalspy, and Mumsnet: playful and frivolous chat pervades these forums; users display little inclination to engage in political discussion; and an underlying passivity towards the political process and cynicism towards politics and politicians characterise the generated talk. With respect to SNSs, Wright et al. (2016) observe how there has been relatively little research focusing on how third spaces can form on SNSs. They note that only certain areas of these platforms – for instance, Facebook groups developing around fashion or football – can be considered third spaces, while this definition cannot be extended to highly political areas such as politicians’ Facebook pages or Twitter accounts. Wright et al. (2016) argue that social media are arenas in which the personal can overlap with the political, and where political talk is present and can even thrive.

Third spaces are relevant also to the academic debate concerning one of the main criticisms levelled at the Internet as a political platform, namely its alleged tendency to promote political fragmentation (this issue has also been discussed in the previous section). Habermas (2006) argues that within liberal systems, the Internet will lead to the fragmentation of the mass audience, endangering communication in the established public spheres. One of the most prominent advocates of this position is Sunstein (2001), who suggests that in the online environment individuals tend to operate in *echo-chambers*, interacting with like-minded users. In the same vein, Davis and Owen (1998), despite recognising the potential of the Internet to draw into political discussions a wide variety of people in terms of viewpoint, background and location, conclude that online discussions are likely to be as narrow as the ones between neighbours. Similarly, focusing on Facebook, Kushin and Kitchener (2009) find that in terms of representation of viewpoints the contributions to a Facebook group focused on the debate over US policies regarding torture were highly skewed towards participants holding similar positions. These authors sustain the so-called *homophily* perspective, according to which online users tend to expose themselves to concurring opinions (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995).

In contrast with the *homophily* perspective, there are a number of authors who contend that the Internet (Brundidge 2007; Stromer-Galley 2003; Zhang et al. 2013) and SNSs (Bae 2013; Kim 2011; Vickery 2009) offer opportunities for heterogeneous political discussions, i.e., discussion among individuals holding contrasting political views. In a qualitative study

targeting users of online political discussion groups, Stromer-Galley (2003) confirms this stance, finding that participants consider themselves to be exposed to different viewpoints, and that they appreciate and enjoy the diversity of people and opinions. Concentrating on third spaces, Graham and Harju (2011) and Wright et al. (2016) highlight that these forums are not strictly political, with users visiting them due to some kind of shared tie, meaning that political talk is more difficult to avoid and less likely to be polarised. Thus users may end up being exposed to politics inadvertently (see the previous section for a discussion of Brundidge's – 2010 – *inadvertency thesis*).

Finally, further concerns emerge because online discussions are often characterised by deception, incivility and impoliteness (Papacharissi – 2004 – distinguishes between uncivil behaviours which are harmful to democratic norms, and impolite behaviours which do not acknowledge the netiquette). The phenomenon of *trolling* is a typical example of online deception. As illustrated by Donath (1999), *trolls* infiltrate online groups, presenting themselves as individuals sharing the group interests and, once accepted, disrupt the proceedings of discussions. The presence of trolls in online forums can negatively influence users' perceptions of other participants, limit self-revelations, encourage scepticism towards the revelations of others, ultimately leading to the discussants' withdrawal (Dahlberg 2001). The anonymity inherent in using the Internet enables individuals to control the amount and type (true vs. fictitious) of identity they are disclosing, allowing behaviours such as trolling (Morrissey 2010). Postmes et al. (2002) indicate that anonymity can also allow people to stereotype and dismiss opinions of *out-group members*, i.e., individuals belonging to different social groups (Tajfel and Turner 1986), and affect the tone and the nature of discussion. With respect to this last issue, various scholars identify anonymity as a key determinant of the impoliteness, incivility and acts of attack (i.e., *flaming*) often encountered in online political communications (Davis 1999, 2005; Hill and Hughes 1998). Alonzo and Aiken (2004) describe flaming – which, like trolling, can intimidate individuals from participating in online discussions (Mitra 1997) – as “hostile intentions characterized by words of profanity, obscenity, and insults that inflict harm to a person or an organization resulting from uninhibited behaviour” (p. 205). The motivations behind these attacks range from enjoyment of confrontation, to personal satisfaction caused by the harassment of political adversaries, and the desire to express unpopular opinions suppressed in the offline world (Freelon 2010).

In contrast with previous research, in a content analysis of 287 political newsgroup discussion threads, Papacharissi (2004) acknowledges the heated and confrontational nature

of online political discussion, but also establishes that incivility and impoliteness do not dominate these communications. Kushin and Kitchener (2009) support these findings and, focusing on Facebook political discussion, establish that the large majority of analysed discussion (75%) is devoid of flaming. They ascribe these results to the presence of identity attributes within this SNS. Halpern and Gibbs (2013) reach a similar conclusion in their investigation of the potential of social media to foster democratic deliberation. They infer that, in comparison to more anonymous and de-individuated websites like Youtube, SNSs with significant affordances of identifiability and networked information (e.g., Facebook) promote a greater level of politeness and are better suited for deliberation. Facebook profiles tend, in fact, to represent users honestly (Lampe et al. 2007), with individuals maintaining relatively open and recognisable Facebook profiles where even personal information such as photos, religion, interests and political affiliation are displayed (Ellison et al. 2011). In addition, Utz (2010) notes that even in the case of *fake* profiles, users can draw inferences about the real identity of others through the information provided by their Facebook contacts and the system (see Section 2.4 for a further discussion of the *anonymous* nature of Facebook).

This section has examined how the Internet can affect political discussion. It has stressed the increase in numbers of individuals who are engaging in this type of political activity online due to the flexibility and multiplicity of discussion venues, both political and non-political, offered by digital technologies. Online political discussions seem to be monopolised by a number of *superparticipants*, a dominant minority, albeit one which seems to perform a positive function and foster the engagement of other users. With respect to SNSs, research establishes that these platforms have gradually become relevant arenas for political discussion and opened up unprecedented opportunities, both for political talk and more formal and deliberative forms of discussion. As with the consumption of political information, so with political discussion, one of the main criticisms of digital technologies is their alleged tendency to promote political fragmentation and polarisation, a viewpoint that that has attracted, so far, varying levels of support in research. A further concern raised by some academics is that, encouraged by the anonymous nature of the digital environment, deception, incivility and impoliteness often characterise online communications. However, such a criticism holds less true for SNSs like Facebook, due to the presence of significant affordances of identifiability and networked information.

3.4 Political Mobilisation: Slacktivism, Reinforcement and Mobilisation

The previous two sections have dealt with the axes of information and discussion, spheres that fall within the communication dimension of political participation conceptualised in this thesis. This last section considers the third axis identified by Vedel (2007) to make sense of the political uses of the Internet, and discusses the contributions of the Internet and SNSs to the mobilisation dimension of political participation. Davis et al. (2007, p. 17) define mobilisation as “a specialized form of political communication, an attempt to do more than just inform, but to engage supporters to act.” Similarly, in this thesis, mobilisation is intended to mean a range of political activities aiming to influence governments’ actions or other individuals’ political behaviour. The literature examining the links between digital technologies and political mobilisation is rich and complex. It can be divided in two main streams of research, one concentrating on groups like social movements, political parties, etc. (e.g., Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Castells 2012; Gibson et al. 2003; Della Porta and Mosca 2005; van de Donk et al. 2004) and the other one focusing on individuals (e.g., Brodock 2010; Christensen 2011; Hargittai and Shaw 2013). As citizens are the focus of the present thesis, this section concentrates on the latter stream of research.

With respect to the contributions of the Internet to citizens’ mobilisation, academics seem to disagree on the mobilising power of this medium, replicating the debate between optimists, normalisers and pessimists which emerged in relation to political participation in general (see Section 3.1). Some researchers stress the capability of digital technologies to mobilise inactive citizens, peripheral group members and young people who tend to avoid more traditional and institutionalised forms of participation (Earl and Kimport 2011; Enjolras et al. 2012; Lusoli and Ward 2003, 2006; Postmes and Brunsting 2002; Rice et al. 2013; Theocharis 2011). For instance, Enjolras et al. (2012) examine how social media affect participation in offline demonstrations, suggesting that these technologies can operate as an alternative to mainstream media and traditional political organisations, and reach different segments of the population. A mobilising effect is also found by Rice et al. (2013), who observe that college students participate less through traditional mechanisms than older people, but engage in other activities such as friending candidates or joining political groups on SNSs – actions that mobilise them and lead them to engage in the electoral and political process, both online and offline. Anduiza et al. (2009) argue that the Internet can influence mobilisation also by exposing citizens to an increased number of appeals to participate, and by multiplying the number of senders of such appeals (Verba et al.’s – 1995 – CVM explains the relevance of recruitment requests for the participation process, see Section 2.1.2).

Focusing specifically on SNSs, Earl and Kimport (2011) speak of *supersize effect*, believing that these platforms can increase the volume of mobilisation by lowering the thresholds of participation, and through the introduction of new forms of mobilisation. Along the same lines, Postmes and Brunsting (2012) note that, besides online equivalents of offline forms of participation such as petitions and letter writing, the last decade has also seen a rise in new forms of action such as defacements, virtual blockades, and site hijacking. Denning (2001) identifies three different online based mobilisation activities: *activism*, which comprises activities such as promoting a cause or coordinating and planning offline initiatives; *hacktivism*, which involves hacking techniques aiming to temporarily disrupt websites or limit the access to a target's computer without causing any long-term damage; and *cyberterrorism*, which consists of activities intended to cause grave physical or economic damages to individuals or groups.

Other scholars investigating the impact of digital tools on mobilisation paint a more negative picture. Contrasting with much of the research on Internet activism, Nielsen (2009) identifies three problems which can hinder activists: over-communication, miscommunication, and communication overload. Marichal (2013) asserts that the Internet, instead of fostering citizens' mobilisation, can facilitate another form of political participation defined as *microactivism* which includes actions such as creating political Facebook groups, posting political articles on Twitter, and uploading political videos on Youtube. Microactivism does not aim to affect governments' actions but echoes micro-level intentions (Marichal 2013). Morozov (2011) argues that microactivism can negatively affect citizens' political engagement in that it facilitates *slacktivism*, which encompasses activities that satisfy people's needs for social connection but detract from more formal and meaningful types of political participation, therefore having no impact on political outcomes. Associated with the phenomenon of slacktivism is that of *clicktivism*. Clicktivism relates to the trend of reducing political participation to clicking on a few links, as if such activities could have a political impact of their own (Karpf 2010). These observations are corroborated by several studies. In a paper investigating the connection between the UK Government's ePetitioning system and Facebook groups, Panagiotopoulos et al. (2011) find that the numbers of members in Facebook groups supporting specific petitions is not reflected in the number of signatures collected. Pickerill (2000, 2003) shows too that activists, particularly those engaged in direct action, see online activism as a deterrent and distraction from real world activities, or as a type of participation with a limited impact. Similar findings are produced by Gustafsson (2012), who determine that Swedish Facebook users – both activists and non-activists – see

their political participation on Facebook as a form of identity maintenance and do not regard these activities as meaningful political participation.

Thus the two main arguments put forward by adherents of the slacktivism standpoint are that online activism is less effective than offline activism, and that it tends to replace traditional offline participatory forms. Christensen (2011) scrutinises these two criticisms and establishes that, while it is not possible to accurately assess the impact of online campaigns on offline decisions, not much evidence in support of the substitution thesis has been found. In opposition to the slacktivism perspective, Christensen (2011) argues that the Internet seems to be able to favour offline mobilisation and to invigorate citizens' political participation. In this sense, he supports the mobilisation stance presented at the beginning of this section.

Other researchers provide evidence in support of the reinforcement thesis (Brodock 2010; Mascheroni 2012; Neumayer and Raffl 2008). Brodock (2010) recognises that the Internet has furthered activists' communication and organisational efforts, but also points out that these tools are exploited by a limited number of people, and thus offline dynamics are carried over into the online space. Considering the role of SNSs in the 2008 anti-FARC-rallies, Neumayer and Raffl (2008) argue that, in countries with great social inequalities such as Colombia, using these platforms is a privilege granted to a relatively small elite. Substantiating the theory that offline participatory divides are replicated and reinforced online, Mascheroni (2012) establishes that political activity on SNSs is contingent and largely dependent on participants' civic culture (i.e., pre-existing political engagement). However, Mascheroni (2012) also provides some support to the mobilisation stance and, taking the Popolo Viola movement as an example, indicates that fragmented and isolated individuals lacking resources for mobilisation in their offline contexts can build a sense of belonging on SNSs, and eventually mobilise offline. Hargittai and Shaw (2013), Nam (2012), and Oser et al. (2013) also find dual effects of the Internet on political mobilisation, backing up both the reinforcement and mobilisation theses. Hargittai and Shaw (2013) observe that the Internet may generate new pathways for mobilisation, but is unlikely to transform existing participatory patterns, with Internet skills strongly mediating the participation in online mobilisation activities. Similarly, Nam (2012) highlights that users who are politically active online do not differ categorically from those who participate politically offline. However, he also establishes that, while socio-economic divides appear in both online and offline mobilisation, the generational and racial gaps found offline are not replicated online (Nam, 2012). Finally, Oser et al. (2013) confirm the reinforcement

hypotheses establishing that advantaged citizens in terms of education and income are more politically active both online and offline, but on the other hand also corroborate the mobilisation thesis with respect to the involvement of young people in online activism.

If researchers disagree on capabilities of digital technologies to mobilise citizens, there seems however to be a general consensus on the positive impact of the Internet on the initiatives of activists, which are intended in this thesis as a specific group of citizens characterised by high levels of political mobilisation. Kavada (2010) highlights that the mobilisation capability of the Internet is linked to its informative power, with this medium facilitating access to and dissemination of information, enabling rapid and cheap communication across geographical boundaries, and supporting coordination. In relation to this last point, the Internet has proved to be a low-cost operational and organisational tool without precedents (Bimber et al. 2005; Rheingold 2002), due to its ability to connect online and offline worlds (Davis et al. 2009; Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002). Among the various digital tools, social media – particularly SNSs – have assumed a key role in activists' repertoires. In a qualitative study, Obar et al. (2012) find that members of advocacy groups employ social media to communicate with citizens on a daily basis, and believe that these platforms have aided them in their advocacy and organisational efforts. Focusing on Facebook, Warren et al. (2014) reveal that activists use this SNS to seek and obtain information, promote social events, call for donations and volunteers, schedule plans, and discuss social issues. In a qualitative study involving Australian, American, and British activists, Vromen et al. (2015) confirm these findings and establish that all the studied groups embraced – whether enthusiastically or reluctantly – Facebook as an organisational tool. In a similar fashion, Valenzuela et al. (2012) and Theocharis (2011) find that SNSs like Facebook were instrumental to the organisation and coordination of Chilean and Greek youths' protest activity.

The links between the use of SNSs and protests have been the subject of many investigations since the explosion of the Arab Spring (Howard et al. 2011; Khamis and Vaughn 2012; Lim 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Wolfsfeld et al. 2013). Khamis and Vaughn (2012) indicate Facebook as a key mobilising tool for the Egyptian protest movement. They argue that this platform became a forum for free speech and political networking, and offered a virtual space in which to assemble and organise protests. Facebook was employed by protesters as an information board to document protests and government brutality, enabling protesters to gain international support (Khamis and Vaughn 2012). The relevance of Facebook to the Egyptian revolution is confirmed in Tufekci and Wilson's (2012) survey of people

participating in Tahrir Square protests. According to them, Facebook provided new sources of information not easily controlled by the regime, and influenced individuals' decisions about protest participation, the logistics of the protests, and their likelihood of success (Tufekci and Wilson 2012).

Lim (2012) explains that in Egypt social media enabled activists to reach and expand networks of disaffected Egyptians, frame issues, propagate messages, and finally transform online activism into offline protests. Similarly, Howard et al. (2011) indicate social media as instrumental to the Arab Spring, arguing that "a spike in revolutionary conversations often preceded major events on the ground" (p. 3). A study by Wolfsfeld et al. (2013) contradicts, in part, Howard et al.'s (2011) argument, and establishes that an increase in the use of social media is more likely to follow significant protest activity than to precede it. Wolfsfeld et al. (2013) explain this mechanism, observing that after an important political event people may turn to various media in order to obtain information about its consequences. They recognise that their findings may differ from Howard et al.'s (2011) because of the different samples – they focus on the general public rather than on activists – and the time scale – they examined usage of social media before and after the outburst of the initial protest, whereas Howard et al. (2011) analysed activities in the midst of the Arab Spring.

This section has dealt with the impact of the Internet on citizens' political mobilisation, and the contrasting evidence produced by research. Some scholars stress the capability of digital technologies to mobilise inactive citizens, members of peripheral groups and young people who tend stay away from more traditional and institutionalised forms of participation. They explain this mobilisation effect with the fact that the Internet can reduce the costs of participation in terms of required resources, multiply the requests for participation and lead to the emergence of new forms of participation (e.g., friending a candidate). Other academics speak of slacktivism, arguing that the newly emerged online participatory practices have no impact on political outcomes, and even detract from more formal and meaningful methods of political participation. Alternatively, other studies provide evidence in support of the reinforcement thesis which maintains that offline participatory divides are replicated and reinforced online. If scholars cannot agree on the impact of digital technologies on the mobilisation of non-activists, they tend to concur on the fact that the Internet, and more recently SNSs in particular, have become key tools in activists' initiatives, including protest organisation and participation, a topic that has become particularly popular in academic research since the explosion of the Arab Spring.

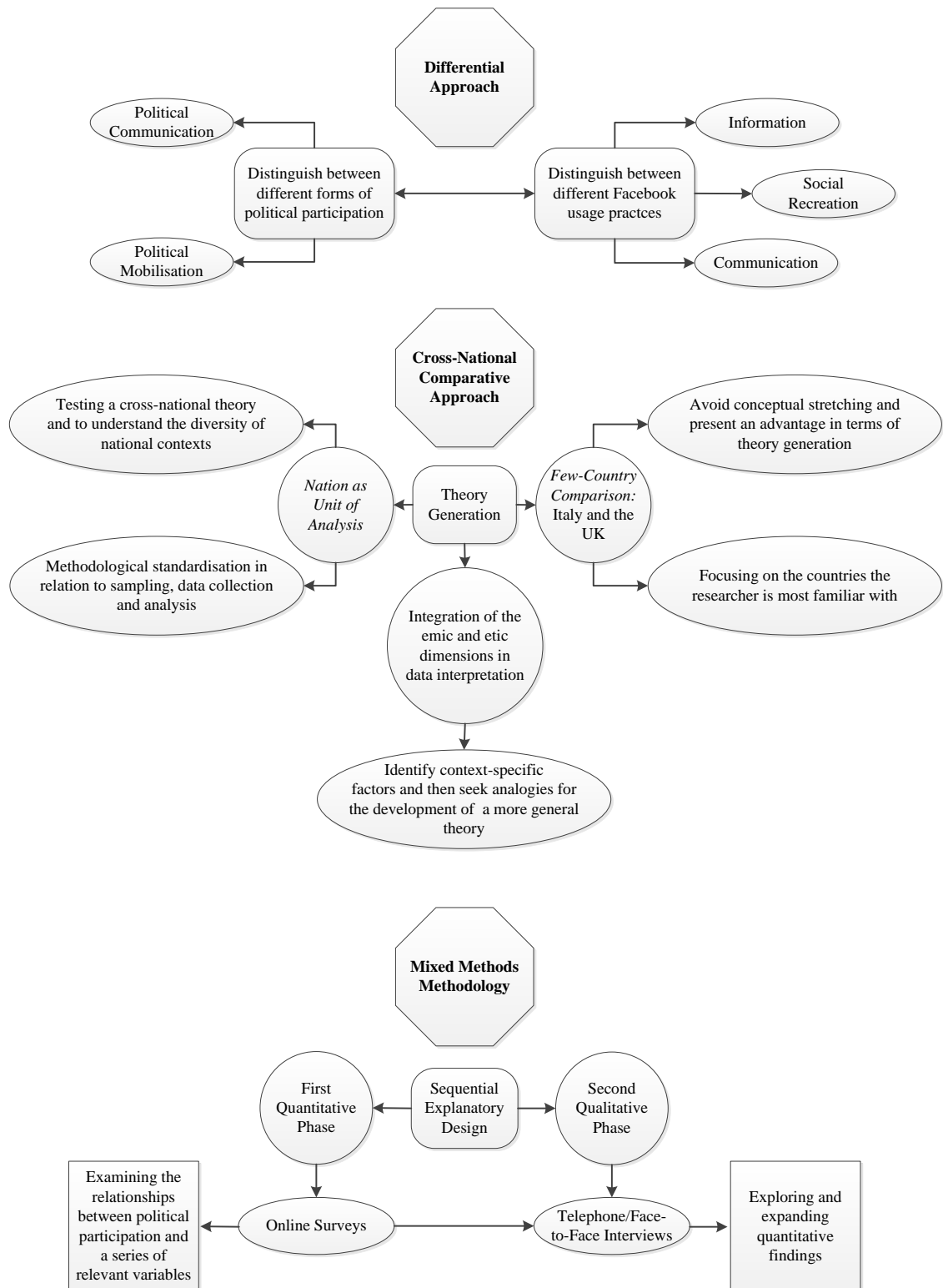
4 APPROACH AND METHODS

This chapter discusses the ways in which this thesis approaches the investigation of the contributions of Facebook to political participation, the methodological considerations which have driven the research, and the data collection and analysis procedures which have been employed. The present study was particularly complex in that it investigated the links between Facebook activity and political participation through a cross-national comparative approach and a mixed methods (MM) methodology. By doing so, it added two extra analytical layers that enriched the inquiry, but also required a solid methodological justification. The methodological complexity of the project is reflected in the structure of this chapter which is split into two main parts and comprises a total of seven sections.

The first part of the chapter is organised in three sections and considers how political participation has been approached in this thesis. Firstly, the contrasting findings generated by academics with respect to the Internet, SNSs and political participation are considered, the limitations of the studies falling within this strand of research highlighted, and the ways the present research addressed those gaps presented. The second section explains the value of adopting a cross-national comparative approach when investigating the contributions of digital technologies to political participation, the challenges faced, and the operational choices made in this research. Finally, in the third section the purpose of this study is outlined and a series of research questions developed.

The second part of the chapter includes four further sections and focuses on the methodological considerations and the methods adopted in the present study. The fourth section discusses the choice of the MM approach. It presents its philosophical underpinnings, clarifies how it can contribute to research examining the relationships between the Internet, SNSs and political participation, and describes the research process. In the fifth section, the sampling strategies for the quantitative and qualitative phases are presented, while the sixth section deals with the adopted research methods, i.e., online surveys and telephone/face-to-face interviews, and explains the tools and procedures employed in the data analysis. Finally the seventh and last section concentrates on the ethical considerations and principles that have guided this study.

Figure 3 – Approach and Methodology: Conceptual Map



4.1 Conceptual Weaknesses in Internet and Political Participation Research: The Need for a Particularised Approach

Section 3.1 has provided an overview of the state of Internet and political participation research. As explained, within this specific sub-field research has produced mixed evidence and generated an intense academic debate. Some scholars stress the positive influence of the Internet on political participation, while others minimise its mobilising power or emphasise its tendency to reinforce existing participatory trends. Similar findings emerge in relation to SNSs.

After a careful review of the academic literature examining the links between the Internet, SNSs and political participation, two conceptual weaknesses characterising many studies falling within this strand of research have been identified – weaknesses that have, arguably, contributed substantially to the contrasting findings produced by optimists, pessimists and normalisers. The first conceptual weakness is the failure to consider the multidimensionality of political participation. As highlighted in Section 2.1.1 of this thesis, political participation is a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing many different types of activities which, despite falling under the same theoretical umbrella, are very different in terms of the resources they require (e.g., time and skills), the actual activities they involve, and the purposes driving them (political communication vs mobilisation). Despite the complexity of this phenomenon, only a few studies within this specific strand of research take into consideration the multidimensionality of political participation (Bimber et al. 2014; Calenda and Mosca 2007; Campante et al. 2013; Cantijoch 2012; Gibson and Cantijoch 2013; Kavanaugh et al. 2008; Macafee 2013; Nisbet and Scheufele 2004; Storsul 2014; Vaccari 2012; Wang 2007).

Researchers often distinguish between offline and online participation (e.g., Boulliane 2009; Jennings and Zeitner 2003), or between traditional and non-traditional participation (e.g., Kruikemeier et al. 2013; Schlozman et al. 2010; Towner 2013), but rarely take into account the differences between the activities considered when assessing the contributions of digital technologies. The limitations of such an approach become evident when looking at studies in which political participation has been operationalised multidimensionally. For instance, Kavanaugh et al. (2008) show that citizens with medium or low levels of political engagement participate much less than politically active citizens in online political activities, such as contacting public officials or contributing campaign donations. However, both groups display similar levels of participation in online news consumption and political

discussion. Nisbet and Scheufele (2004) also emphasise how the effects of the Internet on political participation change in relation to various political activities. They find that Internet usage has a limited impact on campaign participation, while it positively reinforces the exposure to and consumption of campaign information. In line with the communication/mobilisation distinction adopted in this thesis, Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) identify two dimensions of political participation: participation and passive engagement. The first encompasses six modes of participation (i.e., voting, party/campaign activities, protest activities, contacting, communal and consumerism), while the second dimension includes three modes of participation (i.e., news attention, discussion, expressive activities). Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) illustrate that offline activities falling within the first dimension are replicated online, whereas with regards to more passive modes of engagement, new forms of participation emerge. Vaccari (2012) also stresses the risks of oversimplification associated with a “one-size-fits-all” approach and, considering the links between offline and online participation, shows that individuals involved in more demanding offline forms of participation (e.g., attending rallies) engage in similar activities online, while people limiting their engagement to the consumption of political information on mass media replace TV – at least partially – with online sources.

The effects of the Internet on political participation thus seem to differ across different forms of engagement (Bimber et al. 2014; Campante et al. 2013). Using an extensive data set drawn from the British Election Studies from 2001, 2005, and 2010, Bimber et al. (2014) distinguish between *elite-directed acts* (e.g., donating money, working for a party, etc.) and *self-directed acts* (e.g., political talk). They find that, while for elite-directed forms of participation the impact of digital media usage is mediated by political interest, digital media usage is positively and consistently associated with self-directed acts, even for individuals displaying low levels of political interest.

Storsul (2014) reveals that SNSs are the main instrument employed by politically engaged young people for organising and coordinating political activities, but they are hesitant to use SNSs for political deliberation due to concerns about the way they present themselves and not wanting to appear very political. These findings are, however, not confirmed by Vitak et al. (2011), who show that young people engage mostly in activities on Facebook described in this thesis as communication activities (see Section 2.1.1), such as expressing political opinions. This inconsistency could be explained by the fact that Storsul (2014) focuses on politically active youths, while Vitak et al. (2011) concentrate on young people in general. These findings suggest that the contributions of digital technologies to political participation

tend to vary in relation to different political activities, and that there is a great deal of variation in the ways people use online tools.

Considerations of the different uses of digital tools lead to the second conceptual weakness characterising many Internet and political participation studies, a flaw that may also play a part in the mixed picture that has emerged so far. Such a weakness is the over-generalised conceptualisation of Internet and SNS usage that has often led researchers to concentrate exclusively on the online/offline distinction, thus overlooking the impact of various usage practices. The limited explanatory power of the online/offline distinction in assessing a complex phenomenon such as that of political participation is also highlighted by Moy et al. (2005) and Tang and Lee (2013), who advocate an approach accounting for the different patterns in Internet and SNS usage. Regrettably, only a limited number of studies examine how different usage practices (e.g., information seeking, entertainment, etc.) can influence political participation (Ancu and Cozma 2009; Bakker and de Vreese 2011; Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012; Kim 2006; Kim et al. 2013; Kruikemeier et al. 2013; Moy et al. 2005; Quintelier and Visser 2008; Rojas and Puig-i-Abril 2009; Scheufele and Nisbet 2002; Tang and Lee 2013). In accordance with several studies focusing on traditional media (Norris 1996; Prior 2005, 2007, Putnam 2000; Quintelier and Hooghe 2011; Zhang and Chia 2006), research illustrates that employing the Internet for entertainment purposes can contribute negatively to political efficacy, knowledge and participation, while informational usage is positively related to such variables (Bakker and de Vreese 2011; Kim et al. 2013; Rojas and Puig-i-Abril 2009; Scheufele and Nisbet 2002). In line with these studies, Quintelier and Visser (2008) and Kim (2006) find that the political consequences of the Internet depend on the way the medium is employed, with certain usages (e.g., shopping online, following news, chatting, etc.) promoting participation and others (e.g., playing online games, etc.) inhibiting it. These findings provide an interesting contribution to the debate between Internet optimists, pessimists and normalisers, as they indicate that some Internet practices – such as online shopping or chatting – can lead to an increase in particular forms of political participation, independent of individuals' levels of political engagement (Kim 2006; Quintelier and Visser 2008)

Focusing on MySpace, Ancu and Cozma (2009) show that campaign involvement has a significant negative effect on the use of this SNS for social interaction, while is not significantly connected to the use of MySpace for information seeking and entertainment purposes. With respect to another activity falling under the mobilisation dimension, Valenzuela (2013) finds that participation in protests is positively associated with the usage

of social media for opinion expression and for joining causes, but not with news consumption. These results do not corroborate the positive impact of informational usage of digital technologies on political participation, but this could be due to the fact that Ancu and Cozma (2009) and Valenzuela (2013) focus on very specific types of political activities such as campaign involvement and protest participation. On the other hand, the positive link between informational uses of SNSs and political participation is confirmed in several other studies (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, and Zheng 2014; Tang and Lee 2013; Valenzuela et al. 2012). These findings demonstrate the worth of considering different Internet and SNS usage practices in assessing the influence of these technologies on political participation. This argument is perfectly summarised by Papacharissi (2009), who observes that the Internet is a tool which does not itself possess the capacity to bring about social change, and that its impact on society and potential to empower or restrict individuals are determined by the ways in which it is used.

The issues this section has raised, as Cantijoch (2012) also suggests, call for a shift in the ways political participation and Internet and SNS usage are operationalised in academia. In order to move away from the polarised debate between optimists, pessimists and normalisers, it would be beneficial to adopt a more particularised approach which takes into account individuals' various usage practises and the different modes of participation.

The present research attempted to do so, and with regards to the first conceptual weakness – namely the failure of considering the multidimensionality of political participation – it identified two different dimensions of political participation (see Section 2.1.1): the political mobilisation dimension, which encompasses activities influencing or aiming to influence governments' actions and other individuals' political behaviours, and the political communication dimension, which incorporates activities reflecting individuals' interest and psychological involvement in politics. In doing so, it aimed to understand if the contributions of Facebook vary in relation to these two different typologies of political activities.

In addition, the present study also tackled the second conceptual weakness, namely the overgeneralisation of Internet and SNS usage. It distinguished between different non-political usages of Facebook, and assessed their links with political participation on this SNS. Scholars have developed numerous classifications of Internet usages (Kraut et al. 1998, Shah et al. 2001, Katz et al. 2001, Nie and Erbring 2002, Moy et al. 2005, Wang 2007, Foot et al. 2009). On the basis of these classifications, a categorisation of non-political usages of Facebook was developed in this thesis, and three usage dimensions identified: the

information dimension including activities such as consuming non-political news; the interpersonal communication dimension encompassing activities such as contacting family and friends; and the social recreation dimension embracing activities such as gaming (see Section 4.6.1, Table 1, for a full list of the activities falling in these theorised dimensions).

4.2 Comparative Approach and Internet and Political Participation

Research: The Role of Context

The previous section has drawn attention to two conceptual weaknesses characterising many studies which examine the links between the Internet, SNSs and political participation, and stressed the advantages of moving away from the polarised debate between optimists, pessimists and normalisers. In doing so, it has explained that the present research aimed to tackle the highlighted gaps by adopting a particularised approach in its analysis of the contributions of Facebook to political participation, so as to take into account various usage practises and different modes of participation.

However, the “one size fits all” approach often found in academic studies which focus on the Internet and political participation is not the only limitation characterising Internet and political participation research. As Anduiza et al. (2009) illustrate, within this subject area there is also a lack of cross-national comparative studies, with much research focusing on English-speaking countries, despite providing arguments more general in scope.

In cross-national comparative research, comparison can be described as “the process of discovering similarities and differences among phenomena” (Warnick and Osherson 1973, p. 7). Comparison is essential for any type of scientific enquiry that endeavours to discover conditions prompting variations in the phenomena under scrutiny (Przeworski and Teune 1973; Smelser 1973; Warnick and Osherson 1973). Cross-national comparative research is a form of scientific analysis which makes comparison its focal point, and goes beyond the borders of one country by examining relationships between two or more variables within a defined number of nations (Przeworski and Teune 1973). Operations of this sort, in the forms of systematic observations across societies, date back to the Ancient Greece and can be found in the works of Herodotus, Thucydides and Aristotle (Warnick and Osherson 1973).

In the last few decades, comparative research has progressed and found application in a large variety of disciplines ranging from the natural to the social sciences. The popularity of the

comparative method within the latter has to be accredited to its numerous assets. Warnick and Osherson (1973) observe that cross-national research can facilitate the assessment of the generalisability of findings by testing them in diverse settings, something highlighted also by Moy et al. (2012), with specific reference to the field of political communication. Furthermore, comparative research can also perform a heuristic function, providing an effective venue for the generation of hypotheses and theories (Warnick and Osherson 1973). The relevance of this latter function is also stressed by Nowak (1977), who even argues that “in order to formulate and to test our theory in its general formulation, we usually need a cross-national study” (p. 15). Theory generation is, however, only one of the possible functions of comparative research, which, according to Landman (2008), can be driven by four mutually reinforcing objectives, some of which receive more emphasis than others according to the purpose of the study. These objectives are contextual description, classification, hypothesis testing, and prediction.

Despite the advantages of the cross-national comparative method, there are not many comparative studies examining how digital technologies can contribute to political participation. This scarcity is surprising, especially considering the potential contributions of the comparative method to a strand of research characterised by contrasting evidence. Comparative studies are, in fact, often employed to three separate ends, as follows: to adjudicate between competing theories (Ragin and Robinson 2009), as the gathering and the comparison of data from different contexts allow the elimination of rival explanations about particular events, actors, structures, etc. (Landman 2008); to promote a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Hantrais and Mangen 1996); and to facilitate the testing of empirical relationships among variables (Lijphart 1975). These uses are all requisite in Internet and political participation research.

The importance of considering contextual settings in assessing the impact of digital technologies on political participation is discussed in the insightful *Digital Media and Political Engagement Worldwide*, edited by Anduiza et al. (2012). Anduiza et al. (2012) identify three contextual variables expected to mediate the relationship between digital media and political participation: the digital divide, the media system, and the institutional setting. With regards to the digital divide, they observe that differences along the lines of access, use and competence necessarily affect citizens' likelihood to become politically active online (Anduiza et al. 2012). Their analysis is informed by a wealth of cross-national perspectives offered by the various contributors to the book. For instance, Jensen and Anduiza (2012) stress how digital divides can limit citizens' online political opportunities.

When considering individuals with the same level of age, education and income, they find that American citizens are more likely to participate online than their Spanish counterparts. The researchers explain this trend by the fact that Internet diffusion and penetration is highest in the US (Jensen and Anduiza 2012). By comparing the US and Spain, Jensen and Anduiza (2012) also contribute to the development of a general explanatory model of political participation. In both countries, the results confirm that offline political participation is positively affected by increased age, education and political interest, while for online political participation, Internet skills and the extent to which the Internet is integrated in people's daily lives emerge as the key determinants of participation (Jensen and Anduiza 2012). Welp and Whiteley (2012) corroborate Jensen and Anduiza's (2012) findings on the relevance of Internet skills and diffusion for online political activity. They note that in Peru, a country characterised by poor digital infrastructures, digital media cannot really assume a relevant role in political campaigns. On the other hand, in Brazil, where the level of Internet diffusion is relatively high, Internet activities can often operate as a substitute for more traditional campaigning activities (Welp and Whiteley 2012).

The second contextual variable mediating the contribution of digital technologies to political participation identified by Anduiza et al. (2012) is media systems. According to Anduiza et al. (2012), the influence of media systems on citizens' involvement in digital politics is linked to the role assumed by online media which can act as either complementary or countervailing agents. The first case often occurs in open media systems where the Internet tends to operate as an additional platform for the diffusion of media content. However, in more closed media systems, due to governmental regulation or pressures by more general societal and political actors, the Internet assumes a more countervailing posture (Anduiza et al. 2012). Hussain and Howard (2012) show that in Egypt and Pakistan, two countries with strong governmental control over the media and low trust in broadcast media, there has been a rise in online citizens' journalism. Cantijoch (2012) argues that in a country such as Spain where the public broadcaster is the main source of news, and the other channels are limited by a public charter, online sources are crucial information channels for causes challenging the dominant political establishment. This applies also to the case of Italy, a country similar to Spain in terms of the media system (de Frutos García 2014; Hallin and Mancini 2004). Vaccari (2012) provides a sketch of the Italian media situation characterised by the dominance of broadcast television in many Italians' information diet, with press usage behind that of other Western Democracies, and by Berlusconi's control over TV, which was more evident when he was also Prime Minister. By owning the three main private television

channels, and influencing the public ones when in control of the government, Berlusconi has dominated the Italian political communication environment for many years. Because of this situation, unique among Western democracies, Berlusconi's opponents are more inclined than other citizens to rely on online political information and to participate politically via the Internet (Vaccari 2012).

Finally, Anduiza et al. (2012) observe that the political and institutional environment can impact upon the links between the Internet and politics. Particularly, they note that the impact of the Internet on the political realm is strongly influenced by laws on freedom of speech, electoral laws, campaign finance provisions, and the openness and responsiveness of political parties and governments to technological changes. In their comparative investigation on how people participate politically online and offline in Spain and the United States, Jensen and Anduiza (2012) confirm how differences between political systems and environments influence citizens' political participation both online and offline. In particular, the authors attribute the different levels of direct contact with politicians – much higher in the United States than in Spain – to the different electoral systems of the two countries. They observe that the American electoral system places emphasis on candidates rather than parties and encourages direct contact with elected officials, while the Spanish system, where party organisations are the focus of political campaigning, discourages it (Jensen and Anduiza 2012). In their contribution to *Digital Media and Political Engagement Worldwide*, Welp and Whiteley (2012) also confirm the role of political context in mediating the political opportunities offered by digital technologies. Their study on the use of digital media for contentious politics (i.e., protest activity) in Latin America compares protest movements in Argentina, Brazil, Dominican Republic, Peru, and Uruguay. The researchers conclude that in countries where democratic political institutions function relatively well (e.g., Uruguay), digital media reinforce rather than replace traditional channels of participation. On the other hand, in unstable democracies with weak and dysfunctional political institutions (e.g., Dominican Republic), digital technologies are a more attractive protest tool (Welp and Whiteley 2012).

However, academics seem to disagree on the contexts in which citizens can best take advantage of digital technologies for their political participation. Some see digital media as anti-censorship agents and believe that they are most effective in the context of authoritarian regimes (Habermas 2006; Lysenko and Desouza 2010; Scholz 2010). In contrast, other researchers hold the view that individuals living under repressive regimes are less likely to have access to the Internet, and if they do have access they are more likely to be monitored

and censored (Glaisyer 2010; Herkenrath and Knoll 2011; van Dalen 2011). In this sense, using the Arab Spring as a case study, Wolfsfeld et al. (2013) recognise the relevance of social media in this context, but also stress the need for caution, observing that the populations with the greatest need to mobilise are also the ones that find it most difficult to exploit new media, due to the control their governments can exercise over these technologies.

The studies presented in this section demonstrate how contextual intervening factors (i.e., media systems; political institution; digital divide) mediate the impact of the Internet on citizens' political participation, and show the value of assuming a cross-national comparative perspective when dealing with this subject area. A cross-national comparative approach has been employed in the present research in order to contribute to the development of the field. As highlighted so far, the benefits of this approach and how it can help to shed light on the links between digital technologies and political participation are evident. However, the choice of embarking on cross-national comparative research is not a simple one, as this type of enquiry presents a series of theoretical and methodological challenges that require careful consideration. Using Kohn's (1989) four models of cross-national comparison as framework, Livingstone (2003) identifies a series of theoretical and practical decisions that researchers have to make when engaging in cross-national research. These decisions include: how to approach cross-national comparison (i.e., Kohn's four models); the selection of countries; the degree of methodological standardisation to pursue; and the position to assume on the emic-etic continuum when interpreting the data.

With regards to the approach to cross-national comparison, Kohn (1989) classifies the various approaches according to their focus. He distinguishes between: *nation as object of study*; *nation as context of study*; *nation as unit of analysis*; and *nation as component of a larger international or transnational system*. This research falls within the third category developed by Kohn (1989), *nation as unit of analysis*, in that its objectives were to understand the diversity of national contexts and then develop a more general cross-national theory. Hence, the present thesis attempted to identify a series of factors which could help to clarify how Facebook can contribute to political participation (e.g., levels of Facebook activity; political engagement, media usage etc.) and test their relationships in two different national settings, Italy and the UK. The goal was to understand how and which contextual elements mediate the impact of Facebook on political participation, and to shed light on more general determinants of this complex phenomenon in order to develop a model explaining political participation on Facebook.

Such a goal has determined the position assumed in the interpretation of the data with regards to the emic (i.e., culture specific) and etic (i.e., universal) dimensions. The emic approach aims to assess how attitudinal and behavioural phenomena are expressed uniquely in each culture, while the etic approach is primarily interested in identifying universals (Moutinho and Hutcheson 2011). In this thesis, these two approaches were combined. The relationships between Facebook and political participation were first examined in relation to the specific cases of Italy and the UK. Then, having attained emic knowledge, analogies were sought in order to contribute to the development of a more general theory of Facebook political participation.

With respect to the second consideration, namely country selection, this thesis focused on Italy and the United Kingdom. In the initial stages of a cross-national comparative research project, two crucial operations are to decide on the number of nations to include in the investigation, and to justify the selection of the countries. These two decisions can strongly affect the validity of the findings (Przeworski and Teune 1973). Theoretical, but also practical, considerations have guided the selection of Italy and the UK. With respect to the first sphere, the theory generation capacity of few-country studies played a central role. If few-country studies tend to limit the level of abstraction and strength of inferences resulting from the comparison, on the other hand they avoid conceptual stretching and present an advantage in terms of theory generation (Landman 2008), a venture which, as explained, is one of the main goals of the present research. In terms of practicality, Italy and the United Kingdom have been selected because they are the countries with which the researcher is most familiar, and his substantive knowledge is an advantage practically and methodologically in that it can facilitate equivalence in the cross-national comparison (Landman 2008).

Equivalence, which refers “to the comparability of test scores obtained in different cultures” (van de Vijver 2003, p. 144), is a core issue in comparative analysis and is particularly relevant to studies employing surveys as a research method (Warnick and Osherson 1973), as the present one does. The issue of equivalence is strictly connected to that of methodological standardisation, as discussed by Livingstone (2003) in her analysis of the challenges encountered in cross-national comparative research. The present study aimed to identify context-specific factors mediating the impact of Facebook on political participation, but also to pinpoint more general determinants to combine with the contextual factors, in order to review and expand the existing explanatory models of political participation. In order to achieve this, a high degree of methodological standardisation was pursued, and

attention was devoted to guaranteeing equivalence in sample selection and recruitment, data collection methods and measurement procedures (see Sections 4.4.3, 4.5, and 4.6). In this sense, data collection was timed in order to achieve optimal comparability, and the levels of political participation in Italy and the UK were examined during a period of similar electoral activity. In both countries the data collection started in March and ended in December 2012. During this time frame, local elections were held across the UK (i.e., England, Scotland and Wales) and Italy in the same month, May, while neither country held general elections.

In summary, the present study examined how Facebook can contribute to political participation through a cross-national comparative lens. It focused on Italy and the UK, and attempted to understand how and which contextual elements mediate the impact of Facebook on political participation, and to identify more general determinants of political participation in order to develop a model explaining political participation on this particular SNS. To this end, a high degree of methodological standardisation in relation to sampling, data collection and analysis, and a mediation between the emic and etic dimensions in the interpretation and discussion of the findings were sought.

4.3 Research Questions: Multidimensionality, Usage Practices and Context

The two previous sections have highlighted two conceptual weaknesses characterising many studies examining the contributions of the Internet and SNSs to political participation – the over-generalised conceptualisation of political participation and Internet and SNS usage – and the value of adopting a cross-national comparative approach within this strand of research. In the light of these considerations, the present study pursued two goals. The first was to understand how Facebook can contribute to British and Italian citizens' political participation, by the following means: clarifying the links between Facebook, Internet and offline political participation; highlighting the advantages and limitations of this SNS as a political platform; and assessing if its contributions vary in relation to different forms of political participation and usage practices. These issues were considered in the different contexts of Italy and the UK, and particular attention was paid to how contextual elements typical of these two countries impacted on the results. The second aim was to identify other factors mediating the contributions of Facebook to political participation, in order to review and enhance the existing explanatory models of political participation and to develop a more general theory of Facebook political participation.

In order to achieve these goals the following three research questions (RQs) encompassing a series of sub-questions were developed. It is important to note that, differing from most Internet and political participation studies which focus heavily on the campaign environment (e.g., Bimber and Davis 2003; Curtice and Norris 2008; Davis et al. 2009; Dimitrova et al. 2014; Rice et al. 2013), the present research investigated the contributions of Facebook to political participation mainly during non-electoral periods (see Timescale of data collection in Section 4.4.3).

RQ 1: How does Facebook contribute to British and Italian citizens' political participation?

RQ 1.1: Is Facebook a relevant venue for political participation and what are the links between Facebook, Internet and offline political participation?

RQ 1.2: What are the advantages and limitations of Facebook in terms of political participation?

RQ 2: Do the contributions of Facebook to political participation vary depending on the political activity in question?

RQ 2.1: Distinguishing between political communication and political mobilisation, how do the contributions of Facebook vary in relation to these two different typologies of political activity?

RQ 2.2: How does Facebook contribute to British and Italian citizens' consumption of political information?

RQ 2.3: How does Facebook contribute to British and Italian citizens' political discussion?

RQ 3: What are the factors mediating the contributions of Facebook to British and Italian citizens' political participation?

RQ 3.1: How do demographic factors such as gender, age, education and occupation impact upon the links between Facebook and political participation?

RQ 3.2: How does political engagement mediate the contributions of Facebook to political participation?

RQ 3.3: How do the time spent on Facebook, the relevance of this SNS in people's lives, Facebook non-political activity and different non-political usage practices (information vs communication vs social recreation) mediate the contributions of this SNS to political participation?

4.4 Research Design

Bryman (2008) observes that “the practice of social research does not exist in a bubble, hermetically sealed off from the social sciences and the various intellectual allegiances that their practitioners hold” (p. 4). Even if not explicitly, the choice of research design and methods is, in fact, often driven by ontological and epistemological considerations (Bryman 2008; Feilzer 2010). However, in practice, not only observations on the nature of knowledge and the social world, but also more practical elements can impact on the research design, elements such as personal and institutional interests, pressure from academic communities or methodological considerations on the best way to examine the phenomenon(a) under investigation (Wagner and Okeke 2009). Methodological rather than metaphysical concerns have shaped the design of the present research, with ontological and epistemological considerations impacting only in a secondary capacity.

4.4.1 Pragmatism and mixed methods research

The approach to research adopted in this thesis reflects the principles of *pragmatism* as research paradigm. Drawing on the writings of Kuhn (1962, 1974, 2000), Morgan (2007) traces the development of the notion of paradigm and identifies four basic versions of this concept, i.e., paradigms as worldviews, epistemological stances, shared beliefs among members of a specialty area, and model examples of research. Morgan (2007) explains that all these versions treat paradigms as “shared belief systems that influence the kinds of knowledge researchers seek and how they interpret the evidence they collect” (p. 50), and differ only on the level of generality of such belief systems. As a research paradigm, pragmatism has stemmed from the works of American philosophers such as Dewey (1927), Mead (1934), Peirce (1997) and James (1907). In terms of ontology and epistemology, pragmatism finds itself between the realism of positivism/post-positivism and the relativism of constructivism. It recognises the existence of an external world independent from individuals’ minds, but it also acknowledges the relevance of social and historical contexts, and questions the certainty with which such an external reality can be known (Cherryholmes 1992, 1994; Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998). Despite their common ground, pragmatism strongly differs from the positivist and constructivist paradigms in that it sanctions a shift from process to outcome. As contended by Dewey (1925), research paradigms such as positivism or subjectivism all seek to establish the truth, whether it is objective or relative, and produce knowledge that better represents reality (Rorty 1999). The Greek root of the

word “pragmatism” is *pragma*, meaning “result of action”, a root shared by words like “practice” and “practical.” Accordingly, pragmatism is less preoccupied with asking questions about the nature of reality and knowledge, and more concerned with how to contribute to what the researcher wants to achieve (Ansell 2007; Cherryholmes 1992, 1994; Hanson 2008; Morgan 2007; Rorty 1999). By shifting the focus from metaphysical to methodological concerns, a pragmatic researcher moves away from the positivist/constructivist divide, acknowledges that research methodologies are only tools designed to facilitate the understanding of the world, and that methods are secondary to research aims and questions (Cherryholmes 1994; Hanson 2008; Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2005; Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998).

By rejecting the enforced choice between positivism and constructivism, between quantitative and qualitative methods, by embracing them both and placing them at the service of the RQs, pragmatism emerges as the natural philosophical partner for the MM approach (Cherryholmes 1992, 1994; Creswell 2009; Feilzer 2010; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004; Maxcy 2003; Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998). However, adopting pragmatism as a research paradigm does not automatically result in MM studies. In fact if this were the case, it would lead to a new orthodoxy involving the erroneous belief that good social research necessarily requires the use of both quantitative and qualitative research (Greene et al. 2001; Rocco et al. 2003). This position would betray the founding principles of pragmatism, principles which place the RQ at the forefront of the scientific enquiry in order to overcome the dictatorship of the methods. A pragmatic researcher should, therefore, adopt a MM approach in cases when quantitative and qualitative approaches cannot provide adequate findings if employed on their own (Johnson et al. 2007; Tashakkori and Creswell 2007), such as if the phenomena under investigation have different layers, and require quantitative methods to measure certain layers and qualitative methods for others (Feilzer 2010). As the next section elucidates, this is exactly why a MM methodology has been chosen in the present study which, in this sense, can be seen as an example of genuine pragmatic research.

4.4.2 Mixed methods approach: a sequential-explanatory research strategy

The MM approach combines qualitative and quantitative research methods within the same investigation (Alasuutari et al. 2008; Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie 2003; Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998), and it has emerged as a viable alternative to exclusively quantitative and

qualitative methodologies (Denscombe 2008). Johnson et al. (2007) trace the chronological development of the various research paradigms and methodologies. They indicate that after an early period, the 1950s to mid-1970s, dominated by the positivist paradigm and quantitative methodologies, from the mid-1970s to the 1990s the constructivist research paradigm and qualitative methodologies thrived in academia, with the MM approach emerging only in the last couple of decades (Johnson et al., 2007). In this sense, MM research could be interpreted as a response to the long-lasting paradigm war between positivism/post-positivism and constructivism/interpretivism (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011).

In terms of research, the MM approach presents a series of attractive features that have contributed to its increasing popularity. As indicated by several MM experts (Axin and Pearce 2006; Bryman 2008; Creswell and Plano Clark 2011; Denscombe 2008; Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie 2003), the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods can enable the researcher to achieve the following: offset weaknesses of both methods; produce a more complete picture of the phenomenon under investigation; and build upon or enhance the initial findings produced by one method with those from another method. In addition, the MM approach offers an advantage in cross-national studies, as the assessment of the phenomenon(a) under inquiry through a quantitative and a qualitative lens can limit the measurement issues often characterising this type of research (Yaprak 2003).

Most of the studies examining the impact of digital technologies on political participation reported in the literature review are quantitative in nature, and almost all of them employ surveys as research method (e.g., Ancu and Cozma 2009; Hoffman et al. 2013; Holt et al. 2013; Tang and Lee 2013; Towner 2013; Vitak et al. 2011). Only some of the considered political participation studies adopt a qualitative approach (e.g., Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Gustafsson 2012; Mascheroni 2012; Storsul 2014; Vraga et al. 2015; Vromen et al. 2015; Zavestoski et al. 2006). This methodology seems more popular in research dealing with the mobilisation dimension of political participation, with an increasing number of publications concentrating on specific case studies and using qualitative methods such as focus groups and interviews (e.g., Gustafsson and Wahlström 2008; Khamis and Vaughn 2012; Wulf et al. 2013).

While there has been a growth in qualitative investigations, MM studies are still scarce in Internet and political participation research, and only few of the reviewed papers present a MM component (Kavanaugh et al. 2008; Valenzuela 2013; Valenzuela et al. 2012; Welp and

Wheatley 2012). A study not mentioned in the literature but relevant to this thesis is that of Colombo et al. (2012). This investigation examines the influence of the Internet on political engagement rather than on political participation, and it is particularly pertinent to the present research because it adds a comparative component to the MM methodology. Colombo et al. (2012) combine data from the European Social Survey concerning 15 European Countries to data generated by a survey and series of focus groups with Spanish participants. Their study gives primacy to the quantitative phase, and employs qualitative data only to complement the quantitative findings. Even more skewed towards the quantitative component are Valenzuela (2013) and Valenzuela et al.'s (2012) investigations where the qualitative phase is strongly overshadowed by the quantitative one, with qualitative results not even considered in the discussion of the findings.

More balanced is Kavanaugh et al.'s (2008) research which uses a text-book MM methodology. Their research involves two waves of random sample household surveys, in addition to interviews with government representatives and citizens, and homogenous focus groups with survey participants. Through a second qualitative lens, Kavanaugh et al. (2008) try to elaborate on quantitative findings and understand more deeply the links between Internet use and political participation. In the quantitative phase they find evidence that the Internet can benefit not only politically active citizens, but also less politically active participants. These findings are confirmed in the second qualitative phase which also helps to shed light on the mechanisms behind this process. Focus groups, in fact, indicate that digital technologies, particularly blogs, help to engage less politically active individuals by favouring exchanges with other citizens through ad-hoc political talk and knowledge sharing (Kavanaugh et al. 2008). This study exemplifies how the application of a second layer of enquiry which differs from the first – in this case a further qualitative phase – can enhance and explain the findings generated through a single method, enabling a more thorough examination.

The present research was inspired by Kavanaugh et al.'s (2008) approach rather than Colombo et al.'s (2012). Accordingly, it adopted a sequential-explanatory MM design, with the quantitative and qualitative phases assuming the same relevance, both contributing to each of the RQs presented in Section 4.3 (for a classification of MM designs see Creswell – 2009).

The sequential-explanatory MM strategy entails the collection and analysis of quantitative data in the first phase, and the collection and analysis of qualitative data in the second stage,

thus resulting in a more detailed exploration (Creswell 2009). Considerations of the limitations of research investigating the impact of the Internet on political participation have driven the choice of this particular MM design. As stressed in Section 4.1, two conceptual weaknesses characterise many studies falling within this strand of research and only a few take into account the multidimensionality of political participation and the difference between various Internet and SNS usage practices. Therefore, even if most research within this field is quantitative in nature, the links between different forms of political participation (political communication vs mobilisation) and various Internet and SNS usages (information vs communication vs entertainment) have not been subject to many quantitative investigations and thus require further examination.

The decision to include a second qualitative phase derived from considerations on how qualitative data could usefully supplement and extend the quantitative analysis. Greene et al. (2001) observe that, used in isolation, survey research does not offer much in terms of explanation of findings, and that in-depth interviews, when combined with this method, can illustrate and enhance quantitative findings. One advantage of MM research is that it facilitates the discovery of mechanisms responsible for producing associations (Axin and Pearce 2006), with qualitative data helping researchers to explain relationships established during the quantitative phase (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2004, 2005).

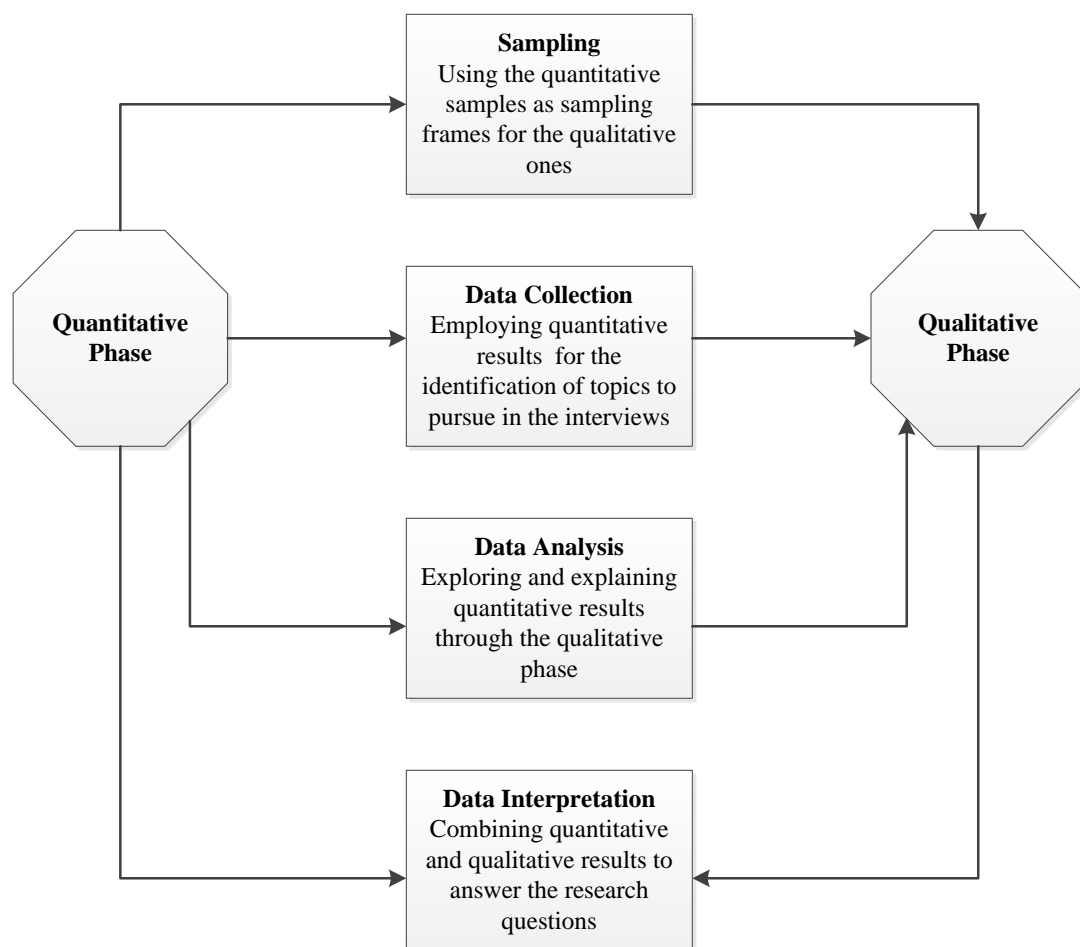
As explained in Creswell's (2009) taxonomies of MM designs, in MM studies the researcher can choose to give equal priority to both quantitative and qualitative phases, or prioritise the quantitative or the qualitative phase. In sequential-explanatory MM design, priority is typically given to the quantitative approach because it comes first and often represents the main aspect of the whole data collection process (Ivankova et al. 2006). Nonetheless, as previously stated, in this research both quantitative and qualitative phases have been weighted equally. The reason for this choice is related to the state of Internet and political participation research. Given that contrasting evidence characterises this research strand, identifying the general relationships between variables is as important as understanding the reasons behind these links, and, therefore, qualitative tools are needed as much as quantitative ones.

The quantitative results strongly shaped the subsequent qualitative phase, as they guided the selection of its participants (see Sections 4.4.3 and 4.5) and indicated the themes and issues to pursue in the interviews (this process can be easily grasped in Chapter 5 in which the results of this study are presented). With regard to this last point, for example, one of the

findings of the quantitative phase was the strong correlations between Facebook, Internet, and offline political participation (see Section 5.1.1, Table 8). However, correlation analysis does not highlight the directions of these associations, and the interviews tried to establish whether it is citizens who are already politically active offline and on other online platforms who extend their participation to Facebook, or if political participation can start on this SNS and move then to other channels.

Regarding the integration of the qualitative and quantitative methods, in the present study the quantitative phase has linked with the qualitative phase in the four stages shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 – Mixed Methods Sequential-Explanatory Design: Integration of the Quantitative and Qualitative Phases



In summary, a sequential-explanatory MM strategy has been adopted in this research. The relationships between different forms of political participation, different channels of participation (i.e., Facebook, the Internet, and the offline world), and various non-political usages of Facebook were examined through a series of online surveys. Then, in-depth interviews were used to explain and build upon what surfaced in the quantitative phase.

4.4.3 The research process

The present research adopted, therefore, a sequential-explanatory MM approach, combining online surveys to telephone and face-to-face semi-structured interviews. This section describes in detail the research process.

Participants' eligibility: To be eligible for the present study participants had to be Facebook users, between the age of 18 and 65, and either British or Italian citizens. Underage users were excluded from the study in order to avoid ethical issues. Users over 65 years were not considered because they represent a very small fraction of the Italian and British Facebook populations, and finding participants for this age group could have proved problematic (see Facebook statistics in Appendix A).

Timescale of data collection: The data collection for the quantitative and qualitative phases occurred in both countries mostly during a non-electoral period, from March to December 2012. In the ten months during which the data collection was carried out, local elections were held in Italy and the UK in the first weeks of May while no other elections were held in the remaining nine months. Surveys were circulated on Facebook between March and June, and interviews held between October and December.

Piloting the questionnaire: Before starting the quantitative data collection, two pilot surveys were distributed to a convenience sample of 12 BPs and 12 IPs. Having completed the surveys, participants were asked the following questions:

- a) How long did the questionnaire take?
- b) Were all the words understood?
- c) Were there any questions you found difficult to understand and/or reply to?
- d) Was there anything else you did not understand?
- e) How did you find the questions' sequencing and questionnaire layout?
- f) Do you have any suggestions to improve the survey?

Participants' comments and suggestions were considered and minor changes related to the structure of the survey and the wordings of questions were implemented.

Quantitative research process: Two questionnaires (see Appendix E), one for the IS and one for the BS were created through the website Bristol Online Surveys (www.survey.bris.ac.uk). The questionnaires were identical with the exception of minor modifications on some items to reflect differences in language or relevant options (i.e., party affiliation and political knowledge, see pp. 305-307 and 315-317). For the first quantitative

phase, the intended strategy was to randomly select a series of Facebook groups, and circulate the questionnaires among their members. The criterion for the group selection was to identify groups containing in their titles the names of the five biggest British and Italian cities in terms of population. The ten groups with the most members were chosen for each city. Among these, three groups for each city were randomly selected and questionnaires posted on their walls. The idea was to focus on non-political groups rather than political ones so as to include in the sample both politically active and less politically active users. However, after circulating the questionnaires in various Facebook groups for a period of ten days, no responses were recorded. At this point, it was thought that the recurrence on Facebook of malicious links and hoaxes could have impacted negatively on users' willingness to click on a link from an unknown source. For this reason, snowball sampling was used instead of random sampling, and a new recruitment strategy devised. In the new recruitment strategy, again Facebook was used as the recruitment platform. The researcher approached several of his Facebook contacts who were part of his social and professional circles, who fitted the eligibility criteria for the study, and who guaranteed a certain degree of variation in terms of demographics and levels of Facebook and political activity. These potential participants were provided with two links, one to the survey and the other to a website which offered information about the study (<https://sites.google.com/site/projectqmu> and <https://sites.google.com/site/progettoqmu>). They were asked to complete the online questionnaires and circulate them among their network. In addition, given that the great majority of initial BPs were Scottish, it was requested that the first wave of recruits target English, Welsh and Northern Irish friends, to guarantee as balanced as possible a representation of the countries of the Union.

Post-stratification of the quantitative samples: To further increase the representativeness of the recruited samples, a post-stratifying criterion was also applied. Age was chosen as a stratifying criterion for two reasons. The first reason was related to the availability of Facebook statistics. The main source of Facebook statistics used in this thesis was the website Socialbakers, which only provided statistics on the age composition of the British and Italian Facebook populations and did not offer any data in relation to other demographic variables such as gender, education and occupational levels (see Appendix A). The second reason was the relevance of age to the political participation phenomenon (as discussed in Section 2.1.2). Through a series of calculations, it was ensured that the age group ratios of the two samples were consistent with the ones of the target populations (see Appendix B for a calculation of the age ratios). The quantitative data collection ended once the required

number of participants for each age group was reached. In certain age groups (i.e., 18-24; 25-35; and 45-65) participants exceeded the required number. In this case, some participants were randomly selected and excluded from the study. Thus from the initial 483 participants, 196 for the BS and 196 for the IS were randomly selected according to their age.

Qualitative research process: A total of 26 telephone/face-to-face semi-structured interviews – 13 with BPs and 13 with IPs – were held. The purpose of the qualitative strand was to explain and develop quantitative results. In order to achieve this goal, the quantitative sample was utilised as the sampling frame for the subsequent qualitative phase. At the end of the online survey, respondents were asked to provide their contact details if they wanted to take part in an interview. As for the first quantitative stage, in the qualitative phase a non-probability sampling strategy was used. The selection of the qualitative sub-sample occurred according to several criteria such as the identification of particularly significant quantitative results, unexpected non-significant quantitative results, extreme cases and demographics. The intent was to generate qualitative samples which would vary in terms of age, gender, and levels of Facebook, Internet, and offline political participation and Facebook non-political activity (see Appendix D for the composition of the qualitative samples and participants' profiles). Through this purposive process 10 BPs and 11 IPs were selected. The remaining participants were recruited through a further snowballing procedure. This second sampling stage was not anticipated and was implemented because among the respondents who volunteered for the interviews, there were no political activists between the age of 18-24 and individuals with very limited levels of political activity and engagement. It was deemed that these two profiles were needed to offer a full account of the contributions of Facebook to political participation.

Rewards: Incentives in the form of gift certificates were used to promote the participation in the online surveys and interviews, a strategy also adopted in other studies focusing on SNSs (Vitak et al., 2011; Zube et al., 2009). To encourage the participation in the quantitative phase participants were entered in a draw. One BP and one IP were then randomly selected and awarded a £30 and a €30 voucher respectively, while a £10 or a €10 voucher were offered to all participants for taking part in the interviews.

4.5 Sampling Strategy

This section discusses the sampling strategies adopted in the quantitative and qualitative phases of this research. Before examining in more detail the quantitative and qualitative sampling procedures, considerations about sampling in cross-national research are in order. Compared to single-nation studies, sampling in cross-national research involves an extra layer of complexity (Lynn 2003; Lynn et al. 2006). Issues can derive from the incomparability of the samples or sampling frames and the application of different sampling techniques and procedures (Milliman and Von Glinow 1998; Yaprak 2003).

The comparability of the samples can be further enhanced by ensuring the equivalence of the study populations of each nation, so as to generate *matched samples* (Braun 2003; Hofstede 1980, 2001; Lynn et al. 2007; Milliman and Von Glinow 1998; Reynolds et al. 2000; Yaprak 2003). This approach is often adopted in cross-national research. One potential example is that of the European Social Survey (ESS), an academically driven cross-national survey measuring attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of diverse populations in more than thirty European nations (ESS 2014). To achieve optimal comparability, the principle of equivalence is applied to sample selections in the ESS. Equivalent sampling procedures are implemented in all participating countries. To this end, strict sampling guidelines are imposed, e.g., “samples must be representative of all persons aged 15 and over resident within private households in each country, regardless of their nationality, citizenship or language; individuals are selected by strict random probability methods at every stage; quota sampling is not permitted at any stage,” etc. (ESS 2014). Through the application of these sampling procedures, the ESS provides a valuable data set which has also been used in political participation studies, such as that by Melo and Stockemer (2014) on the links between age and political participation, or that by Hooghe and Marien (2013) on the relation between political trust and various forms of political participation.

Another example of equivalence in sampling is offered by Xenos et al. (2014) in their investigation on the impact of social media use on young people’s political engagement in the contexts of Australia, the UK and the USA. They develop matched samples by limiting the survey populations to individuals aged 16-29 in all three countries, and by systematically recruiting participants so as to create samples that mirror census data in each country on key demographic variables such as gender and age. Like in the ESS and Xenos et al.’s (2014) study, a sampling strategy aiming to achieve the equivalence of the study populations has been adopted in the present research for both the quantitative and qualitative phase.

In their exploration of the MM literature, Teddlie and Yu (2007) find that sequential quantitative-qualitative sampling is the most common sampling technique, with many studies adopting probability and purposive sampling strategies sequentially. A sequential quantitative-qualitative sampling strategy has been employed in the present study, but purposive rather than probability sampling was used in both phases. The original plan was to combine probability and purposive but due to problems in the recruitment of participants through random procedures (see previous section for further details on the recruitment process), a new sampling strategy had to be devised. Snowball sampling was thus identified as the sampling strategy best suited to the Facebook environment, as already suggested by Bhutta (2012). Snowball sampling is based on a chain-referral process which capitalises on social connections. The recruitment process begins with a small number of participants falling within the target population who then recommend other people for the study (Bhutta 2012). Several SNSs and political participation studies presented in the literature review use snowball sampling (Ancu and Cozma 2009; Gustafsson 2012; Obar et al. 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). For instance, in their study on MySpace and campaign involvement, Ancu and Cozma (2009) announced their survey on several MySpace pages dealing with US politics, encouraging participants to distribute the survey link to their own friends. Another example is that of Tufekci and Wilson (2012) who, like in the present research, employ snowball sampling out of necessity. In their investigation on the role of Facebook during the Egyptian uprising, initially they conducted face-to-face interviews, approaching participants in the streets around Tahir Square. However, because of continuous interruptions and participants' anxiety, they dropped this strategy and shifted to a snowball-sampling approach.

In the present study, Facebook was employed as a recruitment platform in which the researcher's Facebook friends were initially targeted and asked to circulate the surveys among their networks. As participants were recruited through a non-probability sampling technique, the British sample (BS) and Italian sample (IS) cannot be considered representative of the target populations. Nonetheless, some measures were implemented to improve the samples' representativeness. Firstly, the sizes of the two samples were calculated taking into account the sizes of the British and Italian Facebook populations at the time of data collection (see Appendix A). Considering these figures, using a confidence interval of 95% and allowing for a 7% error, it was calculated that both the BS and the IS required 196 participants (see Appendix B for a detailed calculation of the samples' sizes).

To further increase the representativeness of the recruited samples, a post-stratifying criterion was also applied. The application of weight after survey completion, in order to make the sample more representative of the target population, is a procedure often followed in Internet survey studies (Atkeson 2010) and is indicated by Bhutta (2012) as a method particularly valuable for Facebook-drawn samples. Age was chosen as a stratifying criterion due to its relevance for political participation (see Quintelier – 2007 – for a comprehensive account), and because it was the only demographic statistic provided about British and Italian Facebook users by Socialbakers, the main source of Facebook statistics employed in this thesis (see Post-stratification of the quantitative samples in the previous section).

Sampling in MM studies involves a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques (Teddlie and Yu 2007). Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) identify eight MM sample designs, which vary in relation to the sequence of the components (i.e., concurrent or sequential designs) and the relationship between the qualitative and quantitative samples. With regards to the relationships between the quantitative and qualitative samples, samples can be any of the following: identical, when the same participants take part in the two phases; parallel, when samples are different but drawn from the same population; nested, when one sample is a subset of the other sample; and multilevel, when the two samples are drawn from different populations (Onwuegbuzie and Collins 2007). In this research, a sequential quantitative-qualitative nested/parallel sampling strategy was implemented.

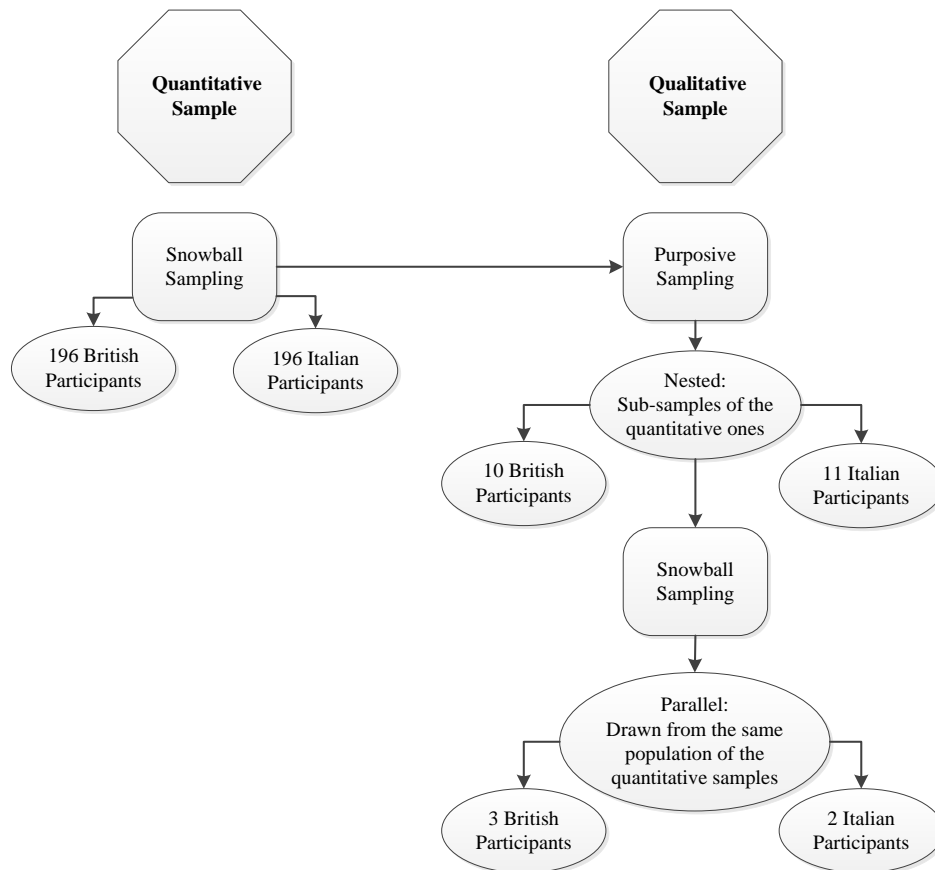
The purpose of the qualitative strand of the present study was to explain and develop quantitative results. In order to achieve this goal, as often happens in MM sequential studies (Teddlie and Yu 2007), the quantitative sample was utilised as the sampling frame for the subsequent qualitative phase. Like in the first quantitative phase, a non-probability sampling strategy was used also in the second stage of the research. The combination of non-probability sampling schemes is indicated by Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) as the most common sampling strategy in MM research.

In line with several authors' guidelines for the definition of the size of qualitative samples (Guest et al. 2006; Onwuegbuzie et al. 2004; Warren 2002), a total of 26 interviews – 13 for the BS and 13 for the IS – were held. Selection of the interviewees was based on several criteria, such as the identification of particularly significant quantitative results, unexpected non-significant quantitative results, extreme cases and demographics. The intent was to generate qualitative samples which varied in terms of age, gender, and levels of Facebook, Internet, and offline political participation and Facebook non-political activity (see Appendix

D for the composition of the qualitative samples and participants' profiles). This strategy has been inspired by Kavanaugh et al. (2008), who select focus group participants for the second phase of their MM study on the basis of their levels of political participation and Internet use, trying to guarantee diversity in gender and age.

This purposive process, however, did not enable the recruitment of participants with certain profiles (i.e., young political activists, and individuals with low levels of political activity). As these two profiles were deemed necessary to offer a full account of the contributions of Facebook to political participation, a further snowballing procedure was added (see Qualitative research process in the previous section for further details).

Figure 5 - Sequential Quantitative-Qualitative Nested/Parallel Sampling



In summary, a sequential quantitative-qualitative nested/parallel sampling strategy was implemented in this research. In both phases, non-probability-sampling techniques were used. In the quantitative strand, participants were recruited through a chain-referral process. In the qualitative phase of the study, a sub-sample of the quantitative samples was selected

on the basis of participants' scores on a number of key variables (e.g., age, gender, Facebook non-political activity, Facebook political participation, political engagement, etc.). As the quantitative sampling frame did not provide participants with certain characteristics, a further chain-referral stage was added. In each stage of this research pragmatism guided the sampling process, and the initial sampling strategies were modified and adjusted in order to deal with unexpected issues. Teddlie and Yu (2007) deem such a proactive, flexible and creative approach to sampling crucial to the success of a MM study. A detailed description of the composition of the quantitative and qualitative samples can be found in Appendix C and D respectively.

4.6 Research Methods

In the first quantitative stage, self-administered online surveys explored citizens' participation in communication and mobilisation activities across three channels of participation (i.e., Facebook, the Internet, and the offline world), examining the relationships among them and various non-political usages of Facebook. Self-administered online surveys are questionnaires that participants can complete on their own through a website. They guarantee the absence of interview effects on respondents and more convenience for participants, as they can complete the questionnaire at their chosen time and place (Bryman 2008). Online surveys are a popular tool in research investigating the influence of the Internet and SNSs on political participation (Ancu and Cozma 2009; Bartlett et al. 2013; Baumgartner and Morris 2010; Halpern and Lee 2011; Hoffman et al. 2013; Holt et al. 2013; Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012; Lew et al. 2011; Macafee 2013; Towner 2013; Vesnic-Alujevic 2012; Vitak et al. 2011).

Two questionnaires (see Appendix E) – one for the IS and one for the BS – were created and circulated through Facebook (see Section 4.4.3 for a detailed description of the research process). Bhutta (2012) observes that SNSs are a valuable tool for survey based research as they speed up the research process and reduce its costs. Bhutta (2012) also comments on the value of Facebook for survey research, identifying it as the SNS best suited to this method, due to the following factors: the size of its user base; its intensive use; and the presence of features like the News Feed and Groups which promote the circulation of information and connections among users. The online surveys aimed to measure participants' scores on a series of relevant variables and examine the links between them (see Section 4.6.2 for an explanation of the questionnaire variables and Appendix F for the coding sheet). Due to the

adopted sampling strategy (see Section 4.5), it has not been possible to estimate survey response rates.

Quantitative results were further explored in the second qualitative phase through a series of interviews (see the attached CD for the interviews transcripts), a research tool often used in qualitative studies investigating the links between the Internet, SNSs and political mobilisation (Khamis and Vaughn 2012, Valenzuela et al. 2012; Valenzuela 2013; Welp and Wheatley 2012; Wulf et al. 2013). Semi-structured interviews rather than structured interviews were chosen because they grant a higher degree of flexibility to the researcher. An interview guide (see Appendix G) listing the main issues to be explored during the interviews was developed. This guide was loosely followed, with the researcher delving into the various topics with a degree of depth appropriate to interviewees' responses. Such an approach allowed the emergence of unanticipated topics, such as the presence of certain Facebook contacts limiting participants' political participation on this SNS or the impact of the negative perception of mainstream media on Facebook political participation.

It is important to note that the qualitative phase started only after the analysis of the quantitative data was completed. Details on the timescale of the data collection and recruitment process for both the quantitative and the qualitative phases can be found in Section 4.4.3.

4.6.1 Questionnaire variables

As described in Section 4.4.3, in the first quantitative stage of the present research online surveys explored citizens' political participation across three channels of participation (i.e., Facebook, the Internet, and the offline world), and examined the relationships among these activities and other relevant variables. This section illustrates the various variables examined in the questionnaires.

Demographics: The demographic variables included gender (Male, Female), age (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-65), level of education (Less than Upper Secondary Education, Upper Secondary Education, Post-Secondary Non-Tertiary Education, First Stage of Tertiary Education, Second Stage of Tertiary Education) and level of occupation (Unemployed, Student, Blue collar worker, White collar worker, Small employer and own account worker, Intermediate and lower supervisor, Large employer, manager and professional). Participants' level of education was assessed through Eurostat's (2007) International Standard

Classification of Education (ISCED), while participants' occupational status was measured through the European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC) (Harrison and Rose 2006). Both classifications have been developed by Eurostat for the purpose of cross-national comparison.

Media usage: Participants' media usage was assessed through five survey items adapted from Kenski and Stroud (2006) and Moy et al.'s (2005) investigations on the connection between Internet use and political participation. Respondents were asked how much time they usually spend daily consuming TV, newspapers and/or magazines, the radio, and the Internet (excluding Facebook). The usage time for each of these media was recorded on a five-point scale (1= None at all, 2= Less than 1 hour, 3= 1 to 3 hours, 4= 3 to 5 hours, 5= More than 5 hours).

Facebook activity: Facebook activity was assessed through three main measures: Facebook usage time, Facebook perceived relevance, and Facebook non-political activity. The composition and range of these measures are presented in Table 1, p. 96.

With regards to Facebook usage time, participants were asked how much time they usually spent daily on Facebook. This variable was measured on a four-point-scale (1= Less than 1 hour, 2= 1 to 3 hours, 3= 3 to 5 hours, 4= More than 5 hours).

Facebook perceived relevance is a summated rating scale of four items each bearing equal weight (Cronbach's $\alpha = .765$) drawn from the Facebook intensity scale developed by Ellison et al. (2007). Facebook perceived relevance aims to assess the relevance of Facebook in participants' lives.

To assess the relevance of Facebook, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement on a five-point Likert-type scale (1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neither agree nor disagree, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree) to four statements:

- a) Facebook is part of my everyday activity
- b) I feel out of touch when I haven't logged onto Facebook for a while
- c) I feel I am part of the Facebook community
- d) I would be sorry if Facebook closed down

Facebook non-political activity is a summated rating scale composed of nine items each bearing equal weight (Cronbach's $\alpha = .866$). The usage of summated rating scales is a common practice in political participation research (Calenda and Meijer 2009; Foot et al.

2009; Kenski and Stroud 2006; Kavanaugh et al. 2009; Moy et al. 2005; Verba et al. 1995; Vitak et al. 2011; Wang 2007). To establish the levels of Facebook non-political activity, participants were asked how often during the last six months they had engaged through Facebook in various non-political activities (1= Never, 2= Rarely, 3= Sometimes, 4= Often, 5= Very often). These activities included:

- a) Watching/listening/reading non-political news
- b) Visiting profiles of non-political actors or organisations
- c) Searching for non-political initiatives
- d) Contacting family and friends
- e) Non-political talk
- f) Sharing information on non-political initiatives
- g) Posting/uploading non-political material
- h) Organising non-political initiatives
- i) Joining a non-political group

In order to assess whether the contributions of Facebook to political participation vary according to different usage practices, the Facebook non-political activity scale was split into three sub-scales, each dealing with a different usage dimension: the Facebook information dimension which incorporates the activities a, b, c; the Facebook interpersonal communication dimension encompassing the activities d, e, f; and the Facebook social recreation dimension including the activities g, h, i.

Table 1 – Facebook Activity: Scales and Indexes

	Items	Range
Facebook Perceived Relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Facebook is part of my everyday activity ▪ I feel out of touch when I haven't logged onto Facebook for a while ▪ I feel I am part of the Facebook community ▪ I would be sorry if Facebook closed down 	From 4 (No relevance) to 20 (High relevance)
Facebook Non-Political Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Watching/listening/reading non-political news ▪ Posting/uploading non-political material ▪ Visiting profiles of non-political actors or organisations ▪ Contacting family and friends ▪ Non-political talk ▪ Searching for non-political initiatives ▪ Sharing information on non-political initiatives ▪ Organising non-political initiatives ▪ Joining a non-political group 	From 9 (Never) to 45 (Very often)
Facebook Information Dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Watching/listening/reading non-political news ▪ Visiting profiles of non-political actors or organisations ▪ Searching for non-political initiatives 	From 3 (Never) to 15 (Very often)
Facebook Interpersonal Communication Dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Contacting family and friends ▪ Non-political talk ▪ Sharing information on non-political initiatives 	From 3 (Never) to 15 (Very often)
Facebook Social Recreation Dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Posting/uploading non-political material ▪ Organising non-political initiatives ▪ Joining a non-political group 	From 3 (Never) to 15 (Very often)

Political engagement: The surveys also tapped into respondents' political attitudes. A political engagement index was developed on the basis of Verba et al.'s (1995) conceptualisation of political engagement (see Section 2.1.2). This additive index is built on five items each bearing equal weight: political interest, political knowledge, partisanship, internal political efficacy, and external political efficacy.

In line with several political participation studies (Kenski and Stroud 2006; Kim 2006; Wang 2007), political interest was measured by asking respondents how often they follow what is going on in government and public affairs (1= Never, 2= Rarely, 3= Sometimes, 4= Often, 5= Very often).

A five-item index drawn from Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993) was developed in order to determine participants' political knowledge. This index contains five survey-items testing participants' knowledge about positions held by politicians, the leaderships of political parties, the results of the most recent general elections, the ideological positioning of political parties, and the working of the political systems of their countries. For each question participants were provided with five possible answers, with only one correct answer for each question. Wrong responses were coded as 0, right responses as 1. Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1993) index was originally created for investigations based in the US. For the purpose of this research the questions have been modified to suit British and Italian political systems and scenarios.

To assess respondents' partisan affiliation, BPs were asked if, generally speaking, they usually think of themselves as:

- a) Conservative
- b) Labour
- c) Liberal Democrat
- d) Other
- e) No affiliation

Different options were presented to IPs:

- a) Popolo della Libertà
- b) Partito Democratico
- c) Terzo Polo
- d) Other
- e) No affiliation

These political parties/coalitions were selected on the basis of the results of the 2010 British general election and the 2008 Italian general election – the top three parties/coalitions in terms of votes were chosen. In relation to their level of partisanship, participants were asked to reveal their level of support for the preferred political party/movement. This measure was recorded on a six-point scale (0= Not applicable, if they answered No affiliation in the previous question, 1= Not strong at all, 2= Not strong, 3= Neither strong nor weak, 4= Strong, 5= Very strong).

As explained in Section 2.1.2, research distinguishes between internal and external political efficacy (Delli Carpini 2004; Kenski and Stroud 2006; Kavanaugh et al. 2008). Internal political efficacy was operationalised by asking respondents to indicate their agreement on a five-point Likert-type scale (1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neither agree nor disagree, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly agree) with the statement: “Public officials don't care about people like me.” The same 5-point scale was used to measure external political efficacy and the statement participants had to agree with was: “Sometimes politics seems so complicated that a person like me can't really understand it.”

Table 2 – Political Engagement Index

	Items	Range
Political Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Political Interest ▪ Partisanship ▪ Political Knowledge ▪ External Political Efficacy ▪ Internal Political Efficacy 	From 5 (No engagement) to 25 (Very high engagement)

Political participation: This study employed three general measures of political participation: Facebook political participation, Internet political participation, offline political participation, and a series of derivate measures (see Table 3). These measures are summated rating scales (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .948; .936; .927$) assessing the samples’ levels of participation across ten political activities:

- a) Organising/participating in a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest
- b) Forming/joining a group or an organisation developed around politics
- c) Soliciting others to support or oppose a particular political party, candidate, and/or initiative
- d) Contacting a political party, candidate, government department and/or local council
- e) Consumption of political news
- f) Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest
- g) Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest in which you took part
- h) Learning about a group or an organisation developed around politics
- i) Engaging in formal and informal political discussions
- j) Expressing a political opinion

The political activities examined in the present research were adapted from a number of political participation studies (Calenda and Meijer 2009; Foot et al. 2009; Kavanaugh et al. 2008; Kenski and Stroud 2006; Moy et al. 2005; Verba et al. 1995; Wang 2007). The idea was to focus on political activities that could be carried out on each of the considered political participation channels, in order to compare the samples' levels of political participation across Facebook, the Internet (excluding Facebook), and the offline world. For this reason, activities relating exclusively to the Facebook and online dimensions, such as posting a link about politics, becoming a "fan" of a political candidate or group, etc., which were considered, for instance, in Vitak et al.' (2011) study, were not examined in the present research.

Participants were asked how often (1= Never, 2= Rarely, 3= Sometimes, 4= Often, 5= Very often) in the last six months they engaged in each of the considered activities across three different channels of participation: Facebook, the Internet, and the offline world. With regards to the consumption of political news (i.e., activity e), consumption of political news offline is an average measure generated by combining three questionnaire items respectively measuring TV, radio and press consumption of political news.

In order to understand whether the impact of Facebook on political participation varies according to the typology of political activity in question, Facebook, Internet and offline political participation have been split into two sub-scales each dealing with a different dimension of political participation: the mobilisation dimension which incorporates the activities a, b, c, d, and g; and the communication dimension encompassing the activities e, f, h, i, and j. Through this operation, six further measures of political participation were created: Facebook, Internet and offline political communication, and Facebook, Internet and offline political mobilisation.

Finally, respondents' participation in information related political activities (i.e. activities e, f, h) was examined using three measures: Facebook, Internet and offline political information.

Using twelve different measures of political participation (see Table 3) may confuse the reader and complicate the understanding of the quantitative data. However, this is a necessary outcome for ensuring a thorough examination of a complex phenomenon such as that of political participation, and the implementation of that particularised approach crucial for the development of the field (see Section 4.1).

Table 3 – Political Participation Scales

	Items	Range
Facebook/Internet/ Offline Political Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Organising/participating in a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Forming/joining a group or an organisation developed around politics on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Soliciting others to support or oppose a particular political party, candidate, and/or initiative on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Contacting a political party, candidate, government department and/or local council on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Consumption of political news on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline in which you took part ▪ Learning about a group or an organisation developed around politics on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Engaging in formal and informal political discussions on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Expressing a political opinion on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline 	From 10 (Never) to 50 (Very often)

Table 3 – Political Participation Scales (continued from previous page)

	Items	Range
Facebook/Internet/ Offline Political Mobilisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Organising/participating in a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Forming/joining a group or an organisation developed around politics on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Soliciting others to support or oppose a particular political party, candidate, and/or initiative on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Contacting a political party, candidate, government department and/or local council on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline in which you took part 	From 5 (Never) to 25 (Very often)
Facebook/Internet/ Offline Political Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consumption of political news on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Learning about a group or an organisation developed around politics on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Engaging in formal and informal political discussions on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Expressing a political opinion on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline 	From 5 (Never) to 25 (Very often)
Facebook/Internet/ Offline Political Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consumption of political news on Facebook/Internet/offline ▪ Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline ▪ Learning about a group or an organisation developed around politics on Facebook/ the Internet/ offline 	From 3 (Never) to 15 (Very often)

4.6.2 Quantitative data analysis

Considerations of the purpose of the present research, the nature of the samples and the data have guided the selection of tools for the quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Descriptive statistics were employed in order to analyse quantitative data. Many of the studies focusing on SNSs presented in the literature review use descriptive statistics, at least as the first step in the analysis of quantitative data (Ancu and Cozma 2009; Bartlett et al. 2013; Baumgartner and Morris 2010; Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012; Halpern and Lee 2011; Hoffman et al. 2013; Holt et al. 2013; Lew et al. 2011; Macafee 2013; Rainie and Smith 2012; Towner 2013; Vesnic-Alujevic 2012; Vitak et al. 2011). Descriptive statistical tools were deemed appropriate to the goal of the quantitative phase (i.e., to identify relationships between variables and highlight trends to be further explored through the interviews), and the general exploratory purpose of the study (i.e., not to achieve generalisation but rather to generate hypothesis and theories).

The non-probabilistic nature of the samples (see Section 4.5) has also influenced the choice of descriptive statistics. In this regard, in a political participation study, Calenda and Mosca (2007) explain that samples characterised by strong non-probabilistic components cannot produce strong inferences, and descriptive statistical tools are preferable to inferential ones. Measures of central tendency and distribution, bar charts, box plots and histograms were, therefore, employed to identify patterns in the quantitative data. As in other studies focusing on SNSs and political participation (Ancu and Cozma 2009; Lew et al. 2011; Macafee 2013; Vesnic-Alujevic 2012; Valenzuela et al. 2012), these analytical tools were combined with correlation analysis to assess the relationship between identified relevant variables.

Non-parametric rather than parametric statistical techniques were applied due to the non-normal distribution of the data, and the ordinal or nominal nature of the questionnaire's variables. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test with Lilliefors correction – which is best used for sample sizes of more than fifty with unknown population mean and variance (Lilliefors 1967) – was run to assess the normality of the distributions of scores. The test established that the data were not normally distributed ($p < .05$) and, consequently, medians rather than means and interquartile range (IQR) rather than standard variation were used.

Table 4 – Testing the Normality of the Data: Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test with Lilliefors Significance Correction

	British Sample		Italian Sample	
	Statistic	Sig.	Statistic	Sig.
Facebook Political Participation	.192	.000	.107	.000
Internet Political Participation	.144	.000	.132	.000
Offline Political Participation	.141	.000	.096	.000
Facebook Communication Dimension	.144	.000	.082	.003
Facebook Mobilisation Dimension	.266	.000	.144	.000
Internet Communication Dimension	.124	.000	.130	.000
Internet Mobilisation Dimension	.261	.000	.202	.000
Offline Communication Dimension	.125	.000	.105	.000
Offline Mobilisation Dimension	.298	.000	.184	.000
Facebook Non-Political Activity	.081	.003	.066	.035
Political Engagement	.118	.000	.084	.002

With respect to the correlation analysis, considering the ordinal nature of most of the questionnaire variables (see previous section), Spearman rank coefficient rather Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to assess the strength of correlations between the considered variables. The correlations between nominal variables such as gender, occupation, party affiliation, etc. and political participation were assessed, instead, through Cramer's V.

4.6.3 Qualitative data analysis

In the second phase of the study, interviews were held and their content examined through a thematic analysis, a method enabling analysis and interpretation of data through the identification of common patterns (Boyatzis 1998). Thematic analysis is a popular method in qualitative data analysis and is often used in qualitative studies investigating the links between the Internet, political participation and mobilisation (Gustafsson 2012; Gustafsson and Wahlström 2008; Kavanaugh et al. 2008; Khamis and Vaughn 2012; Marichal 2013; Storsul 2014). The present research utilised thematic analysis to extract themes from the interviews. Such themes were first used to clarify quantitative data, and then, drawing from the theories which emerged in the literature, employed for the development of theories and models explaining the contributions of Facebook to political participation.

Using NVivo, “an example of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis soft-ware” (Gibbs 2002, p. xxii), a number of thematic categories were identified. The themes were established in a two-step process in which theory-driven and data-driven coding were combined (see Boyatzis – 1998 – and Braun and Clarke – 2006 – for a discussion of inductive and theoretical thematic analysis). This approach reflects the MM nature of the present research, in which the qualitative phase follows the quantitative one with the intent of explaining and expanding on its findings. In the first step, codes were developed on the basis of the review of the relevant academic literature (i.e., *theory-driven coding*) and quantitative results (i.e., *data-driven coding*). Finally, during the analysis of the qualitative data, further codes were added. Once the qualitative data were coded, relevant themes were identified. This was an iterative process in which themes evolved during the qualitative analysis. The identified themes displayed in Table 5 are thus the results of a hybrid (both theoretical and inductive) thematic analysis; based on the codes developed from the literature and the analysis of questionnaires and interviews, it was possible for themes to emerge inductively. See Appendix H for further clarification on the coding process and on how the various codes have informed the themes.

Table 5 – Thematic Analysis: Identified Themes

Cluster	Themes
<u>FACEBOOK USAGE</u>	Importance of Facebook in people’s lives
	Negative perception of Facebook
	Facebook replacing other Internet tools
	Facebook as an all-encompassing platform
	Mainly non-political usage
	Mainly political usage by highly politically active users
<u>POLITICAL PARTICIPATION</u>	Facebook as main online political platform
	Political relevance of other online platforms and websites
	Involving new participants
	Facilitating participation
	Bringing politics into everyday life
	Virtuous circle
	Facebook usage gap
	Need of digital skills
	Relevance of privacy concerns
	Relevance of political interest
	Relevance of political knowledge and internal political efficacy
	Relevance of external political efficacy
	Relevance of affiliation to a party or movement
	Relevance of the amount of Facebook usage
	Lack of time inhibiting participation

Table 5 – Thematic Analysis: Identified Themes (continued from previous page)

Cluster	Themes
<u>POLITICAL INFORMATION</u>	The flexibility and speed of online information
	The variety of online sources
	The interactive nature of online information
	Facebook and proliferation of sources
	The networked nature of Facebook information
	Viral information on Facebook
	Facebook as activator of the information search process
	Issues of credibility of Facebook political information
	Exposure to pro-attitudinal political information
	Exposure to political difference on Facebook
	Exposure to political difference through active selection
	Accidental exposure to political difference
	Interaction and exposure to political difference
	Presence of established media institutions on Facebook
	Facebook as source of alternative information
	Negative perception of established media institutions
	Support for established media institutions
<u>POLITICAL DISCUSSION</u>	Flexibility and exposure to political information
	Expanding and diversifying the discussion network
	A more politically diverse discussion network
	Limited control over discussion and its participants
	Harsher and more aggressive tones online
<u>POLITICAL MOBILISATION</u>	More honesty and participation in online discussion
	Low efficacy of political initiatives
	More communication than mobilisation
	Growing relevance of Facebook in activists' repertoires
	Promoting grassroots single-issue mobilisation
	More information on political initiatives
	Bypassing traditional mobilisation channels
	Detachment from traditional politics
	Interdependence between Facebook and offline political participation

4.7 Ethical Considerations

In the last decade, the Internet has assumed a key role in the life of millions of people, providing researchers with a wide range of new ways to examine human behaviours and interactions. This has led to the development of Internet-based research, which can be broadly defined as “research which utilizes the Internet to collect information through an online tool, such as an online survey; studies about how people use the Internet, e.g., through collecting data and/or examining activities in or any online environments; and/or, uses of online datasets or databases” (Buchanan 2010, p. 90). However, as well as offering new opportunities and channels through which to investigate human behaviour, the Internet also raises a series of new ethical challenges that researchers have to face. Given the perpetual evolving nature of the Internet, the field of Internet research ethics, which emerged as a sub-discipline of research ethics in the 1990s, is constantly redefined by emerging challenges (Buchanan 2010).

In order to deal with this uncertainty, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) developed a set of guidelines for Internet research (AoIR 2002, 2012). One of the AoIR’s first recommendations to researchers is to turn, in the first instance, to their own discipline-specific principles and practices. However, because online research occurs in a dynamic field where new technologies and tools are constantly developing, ethical questions and dilemmas can often emerge which are not directly addressed in extant statements and guidelines (AoIR 2012).

This research complies with Queen Margaret University’s (QMU) Research Ethics Guidelines (QMU 2008), according to which the main ethical issues to be considered in research are: confidentiality; privacy; obtaining informed consent; communicating appropriately with participants; and safe storage of participants’ data.

With regard to confidentiality, Russell and Purcell (2009) argue that the greatest potential risk in online research is the breach of confidentiality, namely sharing purposely or unintentionally participants’ responses with individuals not associated with the research. The breach of confidentiality can be avoided by not requesting identifiable information (Russell and Purcell 2009). However, when rewards are offered, like in the present research (see Rewards in Section 4.4.3), participants’ personal details are required and thus this measure cannot be implemented (Eynon et al. 2008). Another strategy to assure confidentiality is anonymising the collected data and removing all labels and titles that can lead to identification in the presentation of findings (Walliman 2006). According to QMU’s (2008)

ethical guidelines, data sets are to be anonymised as soon as it is reasonable to do so. In this research, the data was anonymised at the end of the analysis of qualitative data. With regards to the presentation of research findings, no particular ethical issues emerged in the discussion of the quantitative data. In contrast, as participants' quotes have been used in the presentation of qualitative findings, the participants' identities have been protected through the allocation of pseudonyms.

Appropriate data storage is another central ethical requirement in research (QMU 2008). Following QMU's Data Protection guidelines, research data and participants' information was computerised and password protected so that only authorised people (i.e., the researcher and the supervisory team) had access to them.

A further key issue in research ethics is obtaining informed consent. Every ethical code guiding research on human subjects gives primacy to the obtainment of participants' fully informed voluntary consent (Gregory 2003). As indicated by AoIR's (2002) guidelines, the principle of informed consent entails the explanation of the research process and of how the material about/from the participants will be used (e.g., how identities will be protected). The issue of informed consent in Internet research has recently returned to the fore with Kramer et al.'s (2014) so called *Facebook experiment* which has provoked an outcry of criticism. As anticipated in Section 2.4, p. 36, the experiment was conducted on Facebook users and manipulated the extent to which people were exposed to *emotional expressions* in their News Feed. The main ethical issue with this study is that Facebook users did not give informed consent. Kramer et al. (2014) explain that the study is consistent with Facebook's Data Use Policy to which all users agree prior to creating a Facebook account, and argue that the agreement to this data use policy constitutes the informed consent for the research. However, as highlighted by the "Editorial Expression of Concern" published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, the Facebook use policy does not satisfy the same requirements of informed consent forms and it does not allow participants to opt out (Verma 2014). Taking these elements into account, it is possible to conclude that the Facebook experiment did not comply with the ethical requirement of informed consent.

In order to guarantee informed consent in the present study, a consent form was inserted at the beginning of the online questionnaires and participants were provided with a link to a web page explaining the purpose and process of research and the handling of personal data (see Appendix E). This choice is consistent with Walliman's (2006) recommendation:

“questionnaires should always provide the necessary written information as an introduction” (p. 155), and with AoIR’s (2002, 2012) guidelines which stress that in order to protect human subjects’ rights to privacy, confidentiality, autonomy, and informed consent, participants should be approached at the very beginning of research and asked for consent.

Finally, a potential ethical issue with the present study could derive from the usage of gift certificates to promote participation in the online surveys and interviews (see Section 4.4.3 for an explanation of the recruitment process). There is considerable confusion regarding the ethical appropriateness of using incentives in research with human participants, because rewards can exert undue influence on people’s likelihood of participating (Grant and Sugarman 2004). Grant and Sugarman (2004) shed light on this matter and find that the use of incentives to recruit and retain research subjects is innocuous, except in the following cases: when the subject is in a dependency relationship with the researcher; when the risks are particularly high; when the research is degrading; when the participant has a strong aversion to the study and will only consent if the incentive is large. Considering that none of these conditions apply to the present study, the usage of incentives can be deemed appropriate.

This section has presented the various procedures implemented in order to guarantee the fulfilment of basic ethical requirements in research such as confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity, and privacy. Before starting the data collection, ethical approval for this project was sought and gained from QMU’s ethical committee (see Appendix I for the ethical approval form).

5 RESULTS

This chapter is structured in three main sections, each dealing with one of the three RQs developed in Section 4.3, plus a final section in which the main findings are summarised. Given the complex nature of the study, which approaches the phenomenon of political participation from multiple angles, this chapter focuses exclusively on the presentation of the results. A more comprehensive and critical discussion of the findings, and of their contributions to the current critiques and debates on the impact of the Internet on political participation, can be found in the next chapter.

The first section deals with RQ 1 and examines the contributions of Facebook to British and Italian citizens' political participation. In particular it seeks to determine the relevance of Facebook as a platform for political participation, the ways in which offline and online political participation relate to political activities carried out through this SNS, and finally the advantages and limitations of Facebook as a political platform.

The second section focuses on RQ 2. It assesses whether the contributions of Facebook to political participation vary depending on the type of political activity being carried out (i.e., political communication vs political mobilisation), and examines how this SNS can influence the consumption of political information, and political discussion in general.

The third section relates to RQ 3, and aims to establish the factors mediating the contributions of Facebook to British and Italian citizens' political participation. In particular it looks at how demographic factors, political engagement, and Facebook activity intervene in this equation.

Finally, the main findings produced in relation to the three RQs are summarised in the fourth and final section.

5.1 Research Question 1 – Facebook and Political Participation

RQ 1: How does Facebook contribute to British and Italian citizens' political participation?

RQ 1.1: Is Facebook a relevant venue for political participation, and what are the links between Facebook, Internet and offline political participation?

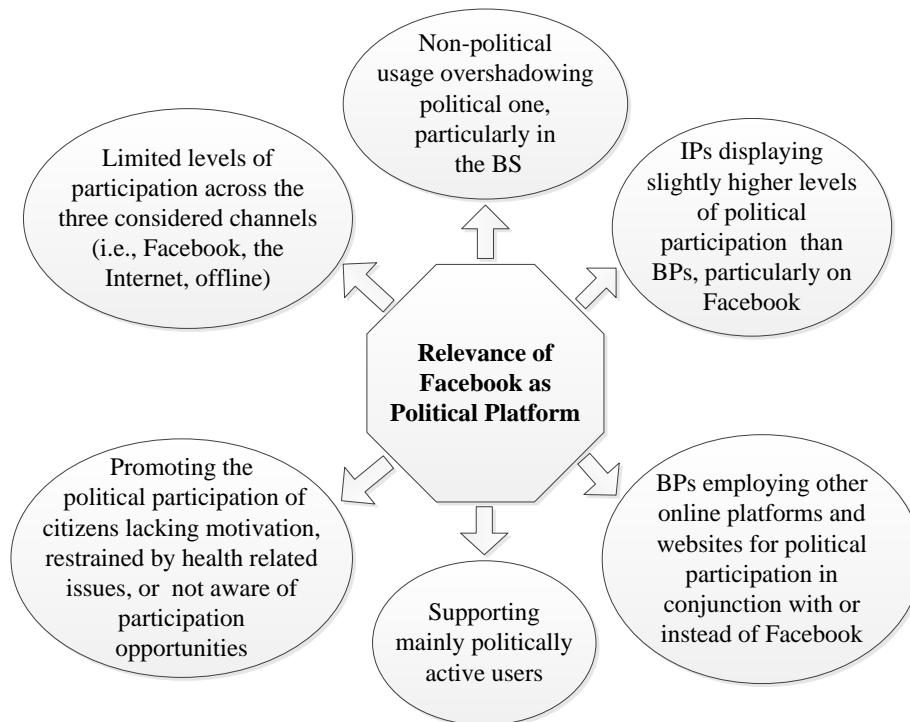
RQ 1.2: What are the advantages and limitations of Facebook in terms of political participation?

5.1.1 Research Question 1.1 – Relevance of Facebook as a political platform

RQ 1.1: Is Facebook a relevant venue for political participation, and how do offline and Internet political participation relate to political participation carried out through this SNS?

The figure below highlights the main findings produced in relation to the above RQ.

Figure 6 – Relevance of Facebook as a Political Platform: Main Findings



In the analysis of quantitative and qualitative results, the relevance of Facebook as political platform was assessed in two steps. Firstly, samples' Facebook political participation was compared to their Facebook non-political activity, and then it was measured against their Internet and offline political participation (see Section 4.6.1 for an explanation of the various scales and indexes employed in the present research).

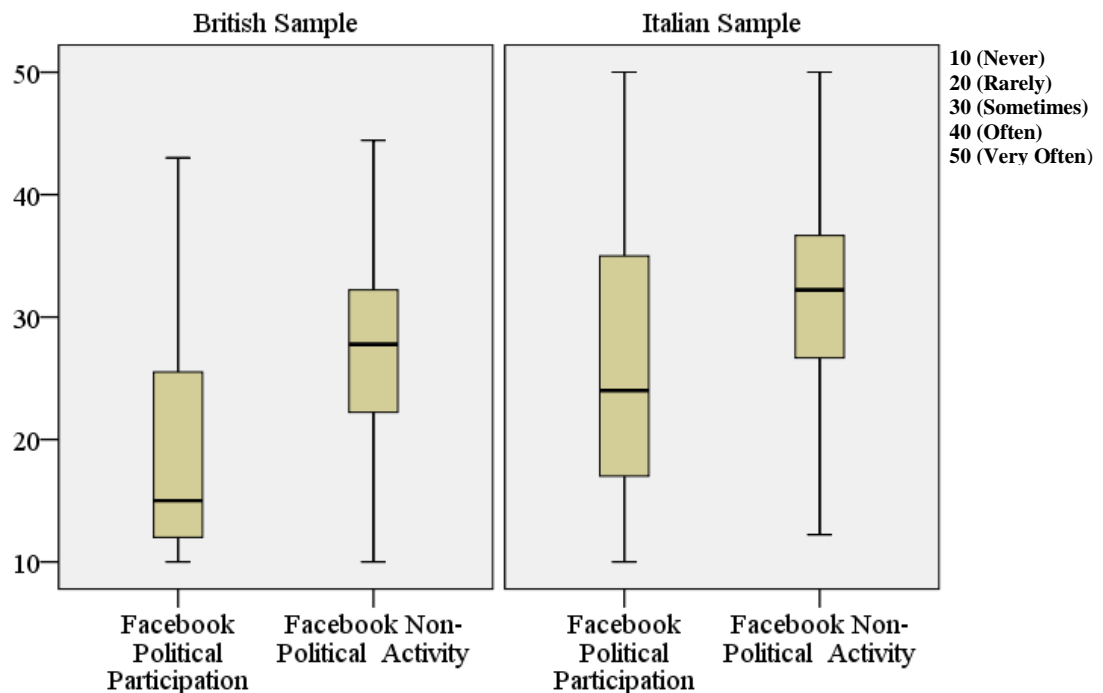
The goal of the first comparison was to determine how politics fits into a larger pattern of Facebook usage, and if this SNS is mainly used for non-political purposes (see Appendix J for more figures, i.e., boxplots, bar charts, and histograms, displaying the quantitative results).

Table 6 – Facebook Non-Political Activity and Political Participation: Descriptive Statistics*

	British Sample		Italian Sample	
	Median	IQR	Median	IQR
Facebook Political Participation	15	14	24	18
Facebook Non-Political Activity	28	10	32	10

* 10 (Never), 20 (Rarely), 30 (Sometimes), 40 (Often), 50 (Very often)

Figure 7 – Facebook Non-Political Activity and Political Participation: Box Plots



The Facebook non-political activity scale is composed by nine survey-items, while the Facebook political participation scale comprises ten items (see Section 4.6.3, Table 1 and Table 3). In order to enable a comparison between the two scales, the samples' scores on Facebook non-political activity have been ratioed up. The comparison of Facebook political participation and Facebook non-political activity produced three main findings:

- Taking into account the medians and range of the Facebook political participation scale, both samples, and in particular the BS, exhibited limited levels of political participation through this SNS.
- There was a discrepancy in terms of Facebook political participation among the two samples, with IPs slightly more active than BPs. In relation to this measure, IPs displayed a greater range of scores.
- Both samples engaged more often in Facebook non-political activities than in political ones. The difference between the political and non-political usage of Facebook was more marked in the BS.

The samples' greater non-political usage of Facebook was confirmed in the qualitative phase of the study. Interviews showed that, except for certain users displaying very high levels of political participation and interest (see participants' profiles on Appendix D and the full interviews transcripts in the attached CD), Facebook was mainly used by interviewees as a non-political platform. This trend surfaced particularly among BPs. Such findings are illustrated in the following quotes.

[Mainly non-political usage]:

Ciro – IP: “[Facebook] is a social interface. For instance, if I don’t have to study or work, I log in, if only to make conversation. For me it has mainly a social function.”

Lesley – BP: “I use [Facebook mainly] for social communication ... I don’t really use it for political [purposes].”

Alex – BP: “I think most people I know use Facebook quite superficially, and I am in the music scene so I use Facebook mainly for music related activities.”

Hilary – BP: “I use Facebook more to connect with friends and I don’t really like to bring politics into it ... So I just keep Facebook as a sort of light-hearted [platform] ... I don’t even share my political views on Facebook.”

Andrew – BP: “Most of my friends are not interested in politics ... I guess that’s probably why I don’t use Facebook so much, because I have different interests now ... I used to use it just a bit more ... just to pop nonsense to friends and to find friends or for friends to find me ... [When I was on Facebook more often] I don’t remember seeing too many [political links], mostly [stuff] like dogs getting electrocuted or people falling off skateboards, you know this Jackass stuff.”

Alastair – BP: “I would say that political activity takes up less than 40% of my Facebook usage. The rest of the time it is just used for having fun with friends and things.”

[Mainly political usage by highly politically active users]:

Rachel – BP: “I would define myself as a political animal ... a lot of what I do on Facebook is either Political, with a big P, [related to party politics], or political, with a small p [related to single-issue and local campaigns].”

Vincent – BP: “If my parents, my family, were using Facebook more I would use it to keep in touch with them, but my parents don’t have Internet access. I do keep in touch with old friends, university friends, school friends on Facebook, but mostly I use it for politics because this is what I’m interested in and most of my friends are interested in.”

Another important finding emerging from Table 6 is IPs’ higher levels of Facebook political participation. Such a discrepancy between the two samples was even more evident in the interviews. In this sense, the qualitative phase showed that BPs often employed a number of other websites in conjunction with or instead of Facebook for participating politically, whereas in the IS, Facebook was by far the most relevant online political platform. For the consumption of political information, other than newspaper websites – which were frequently used by IPs – BPs often combined Twitter with Facebook, or even preferred to use only Twitter. Similarly, the website of the activist movement 38 Degrees assumed a central role in the BS’s political mobilisation. 38 Degrees is one of the UK’s biggest campaigning websites, and BPs used it extensively together with or as an alternative to Facebook, particularly for contacting elected officials. Furthermore, in line with findings which emerged regarding the consumption of political information and political mobilisation, as well as for political discussion, Facebook was combined in the BS with other online platforms such as Twitter, RIC, Reddit, and newspaper websites.

[Facebook as main online political platform]:

Ciro – IP: “Facebook is the place where I discuss politics and socially relevant themes, I don’t really use any other website in particular ... I would say that Facebook is the virtual place I prefer to interact socially and, consequently, also for political communication purposes.”

Mario – IP: “Anyone who organises a political initiative employs [Facebook] as the only tool to attract people, and all the other tools are dying away.”

Raffaella – IP: “[Facebook] is the tool through which I obtain most information, political and non-political.”

[Political relevance of other online platforms and websites]:

Alex – BP: “38 Degrees ... would send you a letter to send to MPs. You can write your own words if you want but they do everything for you. All you have to do is put your name in, your address and click send, and this letter that they wrote will go straight off to the MPs.”

Callum – BP: “[For talking about politics] I don’t just use Facebook online; of course there is also Twitter. I’m also quite active on RIC.”

Hazel – BP: “I use a variety of things. I use both Facebook and Twitter ... I have also joined 38 Degrees and linked with them. So I have done some things with them locally like handing in a petition to my MP.”

Tracey – BP: “I am also on Twitter and I do follow a lot [of political] bloggers and other politicians.”

It was thus established that both samples engaged more often in non-political activities through Facebook. The next step was to compare participants’ Facebook political participation to their Internet and offline political participation. In this case, the aim was that to ascertain if participatory trends found offline and on other online platforms were replicated on this SNS.

Table 7 – Political Participation: Descriptive Statistics*

	British Sample		Italian Sample	
	Median	IQR	Median	IQR
Facebook Political Participation	15	14	24	18
Internet Political Participation	17	12	20	13
Offline Political Participation	16	10	22	14

* 10 (Never), 20 (Rarely), 30 (Sometimes), 40 (Often), 50 (Very often).

Figure 8 – Facebook, Internet and Offline Political Participation: Box Plots

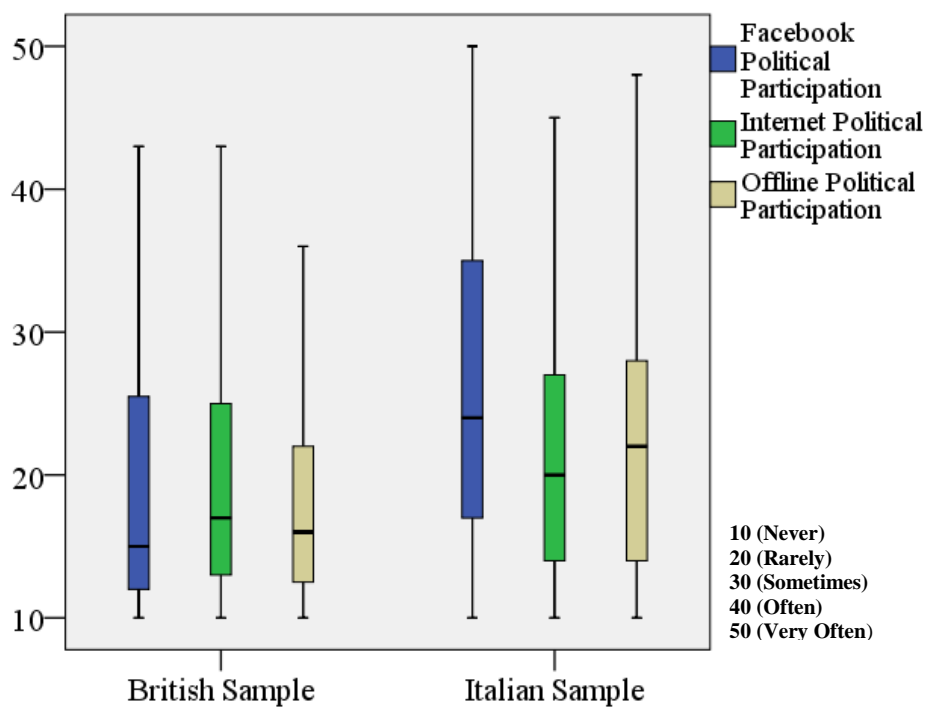


Table 7 and Figure 8 illustrate the following:

- Trends which emerged in regards to Facebook political participation (i.e., the samples' limited levels of participation, and the difference between the two samples, with IPs slightly more active than BPs) were confirmed in relation to Internet and offline political participation.
- There were greater differences between the two samples in terms of Facebook political participation.
- Taking into account the range of the considered scales, there were minimal differences between samples across the three channels of political participation.

- However, it is worth noting that Facebook was the least used channel for political participation in the BS, while the Internet was the most used one. Exactly the opposite happened in the IS.

The links between Facebook, Internet and offline political participation were further examined through a correlation analysis. This was the first step in assessing the tendency of Facebook to reinforce existing patterns of participation, or rather, to promote the participation of new audiences.

There is no consensus among academics concerning the guidelines for the interpretation of the strengths of correlations (Bryman and Cramer 2011). In this thesis, the strengths of correlations were interpreted according to Cohenn's (1988) categorisation, which is one of the most commonly used in social sciences: $< .1$ = Trivial; $.1 - .299$ = Small; $.3 - .499$ = Moderate; $> .5$ = Large; $> .7$ = Very Large.

Table 8 – Facebook, Internet and Offline Political Participation: Correlation Analysis – Spearman's rho

			Internet Political Participation	Offline Political Participation
British Sample	Facebook Political Participation	Correlation Coefficient	.733**	.660**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
Italian Sample	Facebook Political Participation	Correlation Coefficient	.703**	.712**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation analysis illustrated that in both samples Facebook, Internet and offline participation were either largely or very largely correlated to each other. These results confirm a strong link between Facebook, the Internet and the offline world in terms of political participation. However, correlation analysis does not highlight the directions of associations, and, therefore, these findings could back up both the mobilisation and reinforcement stances (see the debate between optimists, normalisers and pessimists in Section 3.1). On the one hand, they could mean that citizens who are already politically active offline and on other online platforms extend their participation to Facebook. On the other hand it could also be that citizens with limited levels of political participation started to engage politically on Facebook and then moved to other channels.

The qualitative phase played a crucial role in shedding light on this particular issue. The interviews mostly confirmed the reinforcement stance, but also provided some evidence in support of the mobilisation hypothesis. Facebook clearly aided the participation of citizens who were already politically active. At the same time, this SNS appeared to be able to facilitate the participation of individuals who were less politically active either because they lacked the motivation, or were limited by health-related issues, or simply were not aware of participation opportunities. Nonetheless, a minimum level of political interest seemed to be required in order for someone to participate at all, and the interviews indicated that the use of Facebook alone was not able to trigger the participation of individuals who were politically apathetic.

[Involving new participants]:

Alex – BP: “Before I had joined Facebook ... my participation was quite low. I was just going to the really big demonstrations, [big events that made] lazy people like me get off their backside and go along, but now with Facebook because it is so easy I do participate more than I used to.”

Tracey – BP: “It may sound really silly, but people who do have bad asthma – they may not be able to go out and meet other people and talk about it. [Facebook can] provide them with a means of accessing information that otherwise are not going to get ... I think Facebook must have really changed the lives of young people who are unwell or otherwise can’t communicate with other people.”

Helen – BP: “[I do not participate politically offline because of] personal [health-related] reasons ... I would say Facebook has increased the amount of initiatives I participate in.”

Antonio – IP: “[Through Facebook] you can definitely reach a larger audience ... I used Facebook to advertise a series of meetings in various Italian cities. [At these meetings] I met many young people who I had never seen before and who told me that they got to know about these initiatives only because of Facebook.”

[Relevance of political interest]:

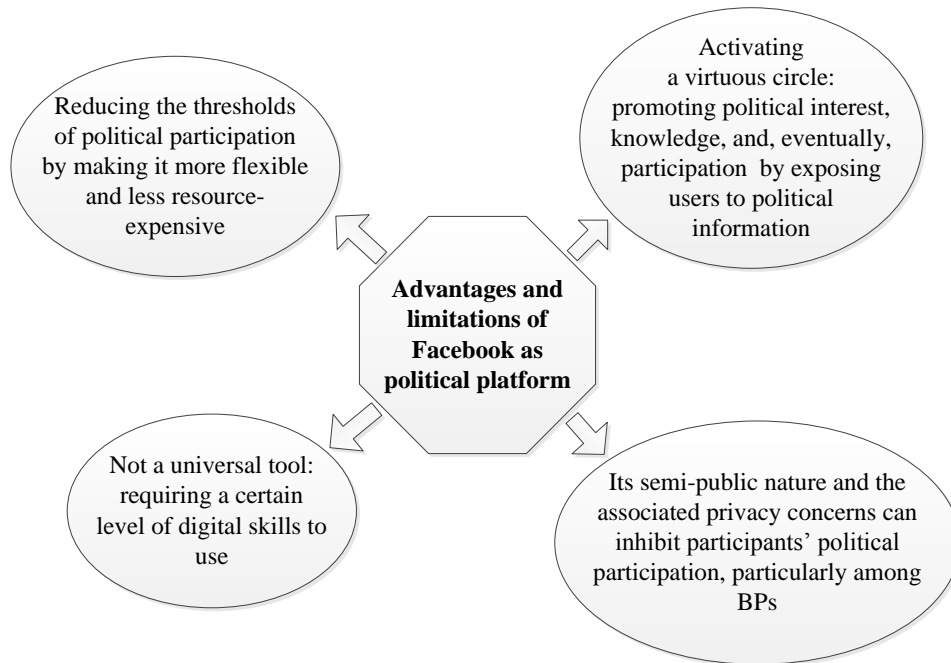
Ellie – BP: “[Among my Facebook friends I have] some people who are interested in politics. [They] sometimes [post] comments, but ... I don’t read them that much because I’m not interested in it.”

In summary, with regards to the contributions of Facebook to political participation, in both samples the non-political usage of Facebook outweighed its political usage, suggesting that this SNS is mostly used for non-political purposes. The two samples displayed limited levels of Facebook, Internet and offline political participation in general. With respect to these measures, IPs exhibited slightly higher scores than BPs, particularly with regards to Facebook political participation. IPs' higher usage of Facebook for political participation was even more evident in the qualitative phase, which showed that BPs often employed other online platforms in conjunction with or instead of Facebook for participating politically, whereas in the IS, Facebook was by far the most relevant online political platform. Quantitative and qualitative data also indicated that, in both samples, Facebook was employed much more for political participation by individuals displaying high levels of political interest and political activity on other online platforms and offline. However, in certain rarer cases, Facebook also operated as an activator of the political participation process, promoting the involvement of citizens who had limited levels of political participation either because they lacked motivation, were restrained by health-related issues, or simply were not aware of participation opportunities.

5.1.2 Research Question 1.2 – Advantages and limitations of Facebook as a political platform

RQ 1.2: What are the advantages and limitations of Facebook in terms of political participation?

Figure 9 – Advantages and Limitations of Facebook as a Political Platform: Main Findings



The advantages of Facebook as a political platform and the factors limiting political participation on this SNS were explored through the qualitative data. The thematic analysis of the interviews shed light on the mechanisms by which Facebook can promote political participation, and indicated two main explanations for the SNS's capacity to do so. Firstly, the greatest political affordance of this SNS appeared to be a practical one, namely the potential it offers for lowering the thresholds of participation. BPs and IPs employing Facebook politically stressed the ways in which this platform had made their political participation more flexible and resource-convenient.

[Facilitating participation]:

Helen – BP: “Nowadays people want everything in one place because it’s more convenient [and] you need less time ... For example people used to chat on MSN and people stopped using it and now they chat on Facebook because it’s easier. Now people get the news on Facebook which is easier – it’s all a matter of convenience.”

Alastair – BP: “[Sometimes, when you try to promote a cause] face-to-face, people zone-out ... they get bored, whereas on Facebook they can just read it in their own time.”

Vincent – BP: “People find it easier to engage [politically through Facebook] because ... if you are doing something and you’ve got 10 minutes, you can read something ... you can read a comment, you can leave a comment, so you can engage in a way you couldn’t in the past.”

Hazel – BP: “I will attend meetings and things, but when I either haven’t got the time to attend a meeting or I feel tired I can still get involved because I can just log into Facebook.”

Mario – IP: “[Facebook] has had the positive effect of cutting the time it takes to circulate information. Now it is so easy to create an event and send the invite to a large number of people.”

Giuliano – IP: “I definitely participate more, because even if I sit on a chair in front of my computer, I can afford to interact with who before you would have met in some public rally, and only if you were lucky.”

Interviews also suggested a second reason that could explain the capacity Facebook has for fostering political participation. The communicative and informative power of this SNS can expose users to political information on a daily basis, and promote political interest and knowledge, activating a virtuous circle that can lead to more resource-expensive forms of participation. This political affordance of Facebook seemed to hold particular relevance for the mobilisation of users displaying limited levels of political participation.

[Bringing politics into everyday life]:

Vincent – BP: “Facebook gives you some interaction with politics on a daily basis that maybe you wouldn’t have if you didn’t have Facebook”.

Tracey – BP: “[Facebook] certainly has changed how I participate and how I communicate with other people about politics because it has provided me with a kind of very informal forum for sharing stories ... In that respect it very much brought [politics] into my everyday life, rather than only being interested in politics during election time or local elections. I think it is more of a day-to-day thing.”

[Virtuous circle]:

Hazel – BP: “[Facebook] made me more aware politically, and by making me more aware I then felt that I had to make other people more aware ... I have also signed up to the Labour party, which is something I would never have dreamt of before.”

Helen – BP: “I have only recently started to become politically active on Facebook, I haven’t always been. The first two, three years, nothing at all ... Maybe because I was new to it, I didn’t have many friends. I think it’s important having friends who post political information to get you interested in that, but at that point I don’t think any friends posted anything, and also I didn’t use it as much as I use it now.”

Vincent – BP: “I have friends who are clearly much more interested [and engaged] than they use to be. [I have seen] people who maybe were marginally interested in politics before become extremely engaged [because of Facebook], to the extent that they started to show more interest in party politics ... I know people who ... are going on a demonstration, they are going on a rally, they are joining a group because of the information that they got from Facebook ... many people are much more active than maybe they would had been if they hadn’t been on Facebook”

Thus the two main affordances of Facebook in terms of political participation which surfaced as a result of the interviews are its capacity to make participation easier, and the ways in which it provides politically relevant information which can in turn lead to other forms of participation. Nonetheless, the previous section has shown that this SNS was used politically only by a limited number of people, and more by IPs than BPs. In this sense the thematic analysis highlighted two main factors possibly limiting the contributions of Facebook to political participation. The first is the non-universality of this SNS, with some participants stressing that Facebook reaches only part of the British and Italian populations, as shown in Appendix A, and requires digital skills that not all individuals hold.

[Facebook usage gap]:

Rachel – BP: “Facebook is not yet universal. [For instance,] Friends of Union Terrace Gardens has members who are not online at all ... so it actually does post things to people.”

Mario – IP: “Anyone who organises an event uses [Facebook] as the only tool and ... probably this is a negative thing as people who do not participate digitally cannot get this information. We have to remember that Facebook is a niche ... because there is a big part of the population who does not use this website.”

[Need of digital skills]:

Kaye – BP: “[I don’t participate much online and on Facebook because] I only had a computer for about 3 years. Before that I didn’t have [one, and] I didn’t use computers. I have learned fairly recently, so I would say it’s still not second nature to me in the way that it will probably be to some young children who have grown up always having one.”

The interviews suggested that a second factor which could limit the contributions of Facebook to political participation is the semi-public nature of this platform and the associated privacy concerns. Participants, particularly BPs, expressed concerns about their privacy on Facebook. IPs were also concerned about their privacy, but they appeared to worry more about the institutional rather than the social side of it (the social side of privacy refers to individuals’ control over their personal information, while the institutional one concerns the usage of personal data by large organisations and corporations – Raynes-Goldie 2010). Privacy in the Facebook environment seemed to be a bigger issue for BPs when considering political participation, with the presence of certain contacts and identity attributes (i.e., pieces of information about a user’s identity) inhibiting their political activity. In order to manage this tension, participants resorted to a series of disclosure strategies, including the creation of multiple profiles, communication via private messages, and self-censorship.

[Relevance of privacy concerns]:

Antonio – IP: “When you talk about politics you have to be careful about what you write, what you share, because today institutions exercise a strict control.”

Lesley – BP: “I think I’m very sceptical about the information taken rather than given. The minute you put something on Facebook is owned by Facebook ... It’s about personal privacy and personal space I suppose, and choice.”

Andrew – BP: “I [don’t like] the idea that [a Facebook account has] got my name on it. I’m a bit reluctant to speak to people when they know who I am, they know who my friends are, they know what I look like, they know my name ... I guess I have never

really been an open person, I always preferred to get to know someone well before actually opening up and being myself, whilst on Facebook you are kind of exposed.”

Alex – BP: “I have ... an extra Facebook page which is under my real name because that it is the name I use for writing music. I don’t do politics on the music [page]. I don’t mix them.”

Hilary – BP: “[I don’t use Facebook much for political purposes as] there are some people I don’t really want to know what my political views are because ... a lot of the time some people can’t get past it. Sometimes, [I discuss politics on Facebook in] a private message thread [which] is not public for everyone to see, and that will be [only] with a few friends.”

In summary, with regards to the advantages and limitations of Facebook as a political platform, the interviews suggest that the greatest political affordance of this SNS is a practical one, namely the capacity Facebook has for reducing the thresholds of participation, thus making political participation more flexible and less resource-expensive (e.g., less demanding in terms of time). As indicated by participants, the second main advantage of Facebook in terms of political participation is its informative and communicative power. By exposing users to political information, this SNS can in fact trigger a virtuous circle, increasing political interest and knowledge, and eventually leading to political participation. A suggested limitation of Facebook as a political tool which surfaced in some interviews is the non-universality of this SNS which reaches a relatively small part of the British and Italian populations (see Appendix A), and requires digital skills that certain citizens lack. Finally, the semi-public nature of Facebook and the associated privacy concerns also appeared to restrain users’ political participation. This was particularly true for BPs who seemed to be more sensitive than IPs about the amount of information made public on Facebook, and the presence of certain Facebook contacts.

5.2 Research Question 2 – Facebook and Different Types of Political Activities

RQ 2: Do the contributions of Facebook to political participation vary depending on the political activity in question?

RQ 2.1: Distinguishing between political communication and political mobilisation, how do the contributions of Facebook vary in relation to these two different typologies of political activity?

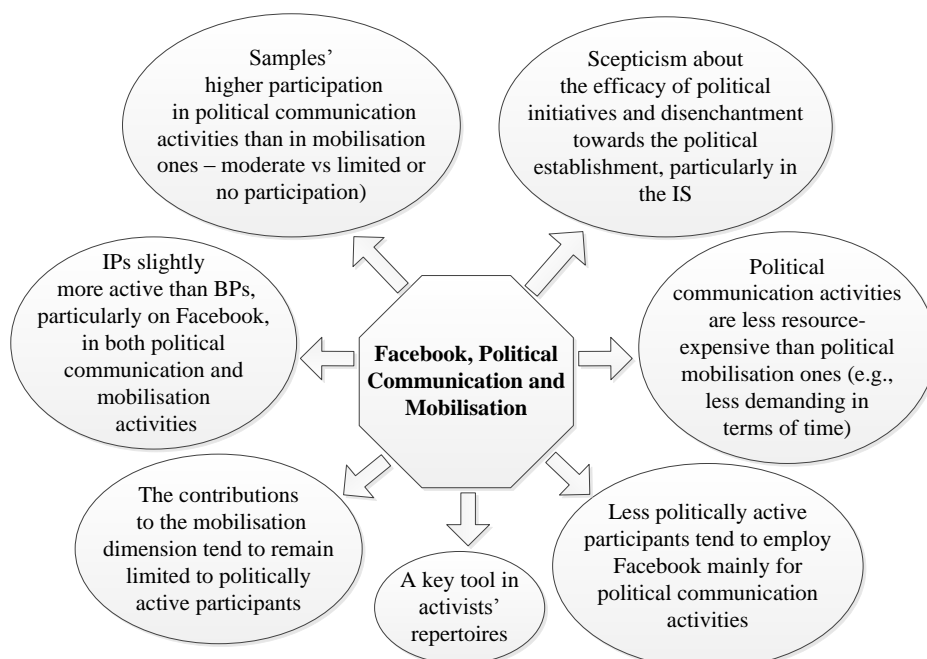
RQ 2.2: How does Facebook contribute to British and Italian citizens' consumption of political information?

RQ 2.3: How does Facebook contribute to British and Italian citizens' political discussion?

5.2.1 Research Question 2.1 – Political Communication vs Political Mobilisation

RQ 2.1: Distinguishing between political communication and political mobilisation, how do the contributions of Facebook vary in relation to these two different typologies of political activity?

Figure 10 – The Contributions of Facebook to Political Communication and Mobilisation: Main Findings



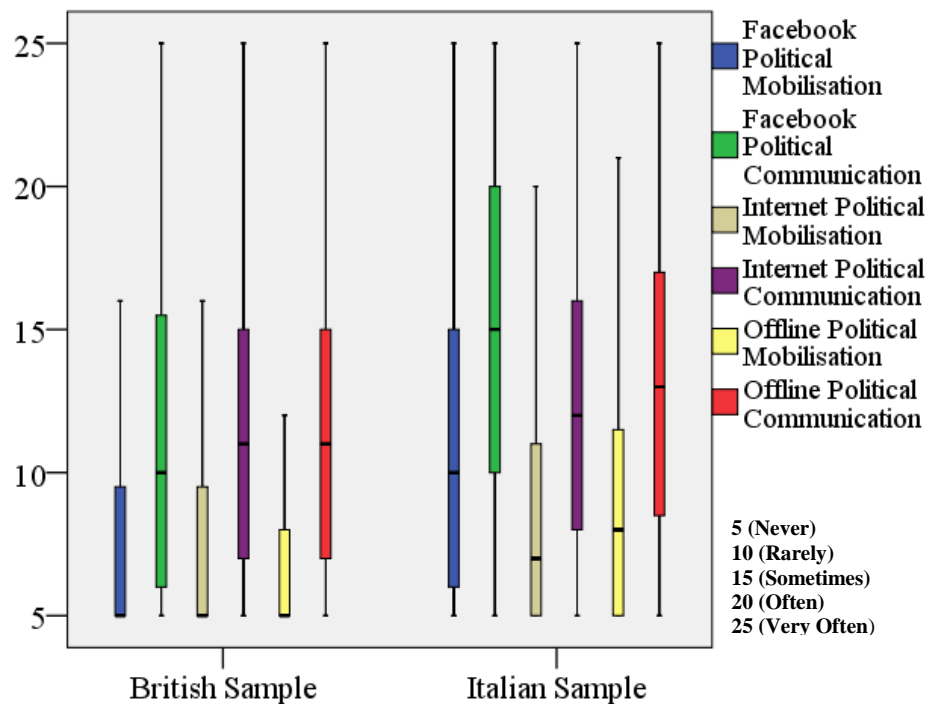
Section 4.1 highlighted a conceptual weakness common in Internet and political participation studies, namely the failure to grasp the multidimensionality of political participation. In order to address this limitation and to assess whether the contributions of Facebook to political participation vary in relation to different types of political activities, two dimensions of political participation have been conceptualised in this thesis: the political communication dimension and the political mobilisation dimension (see Section 2.1.1). The first step in assessing potential variations in the impact of Facebook on political communication and mobilisation was comparing the samples' scores relating to these two dimensions.

Table 9 – Political Mobilisation and Communication: Descriptive Statistics*

	British Sample		Italian Sample	
	Median	IQR	Median	IQR
Facebook Political Mobilisation	5	5	10	9
Facebook Political Communication	10	10	15	10
Internet Political Mobilisation	5	5	7	6
Internet Political Communication	11	8	12	8
Offline Political Mobilisation	5	3	8	7
Offline Political Communication	11	8	13	9

* 5 (Never), 10 (Rarely), 15 (Sometimes), 20 (Often), 25 (Very often).

Figure 11 – Facebook, Internet and Offline Political Communication and Mobilisation: Box Plots



The results displayed in Table 9 and Figure 11 show that:

- The participatory discrepancy between BPs and IPs which resulted in relation to Facebook, Internet and offline political participation – with IPs slightly more active than BPs, particularly on Facebook – was repeated even when a distinction was made between political mobilisation and political communication.
- With regards to the usage of the various considered channels (i.e., Facebook, the Internet, and the offline world), as with the general measures of political participation, Facebook remained the most used channel for both communication and mobilisation activities in the IS, and the least used one in the BS. It has to be noted that the differences between the channels in terms of usage were minor.
- Both samples engaged more often in political communication activities than political mobilisation ones.
- The BS displayed the lowest possible levels of political mobilisation in each considered channel. In relation to these measures IPs were slightly more active than BPs, but their participation remained limited. IPs also exhibited a greater range of scores than BPs.
- With respect to political communication, BPs demonstrated limited participation on all three considered channels. Even if the differences among the three channels were minimal, Facebook emerged as the least used political communication channel in the BS. IPs displayed moderate levels of participation in relation to this measure.

With regards to the differences between the political communication and mobilisation dimensions, the samples' higher scores on the political communication scales could suggest that Facebook contributes more to this particular dimension. However, considering that the tendency to engage more often in this type of activity was replicated in the other channels of participation, this notion was further explored in the qualitative phase.

The thematic analysis of the interviews proposed two explanations for the quantitative findings. The first is that participants engaged more often in political communication activities because they required fewer resources. Among the various resources, time appeared to be the one impacting most upon political participation.

[Lack of time inhibiting participation]

Luigi – IP: “I would like to participate in political initiatives but [it] would mean committing myself in a way I cannot afford nowadays in terms of time.”

Luca – IP: “[With regards to my limited political participation] it is a question of time management – if I have free time I prefer to spend it doing something else.”

Tracey – BP: “I don’t know whether it is just a time thing, whether I just haven’t had time or I didn’t know that those things were on or available for me”

The second explanation for the higher levels of participation in political communication activities is the samples’ scepticism towards the efficacy of political initiatives such as protests or rallies.

[Low efficacy of political initiatives]:

Callum – BP: “When [the government] makes decisions that I disagree with ... I don’t think there is very much I can do about them ... So I suppose in a sense I feel that marching won’t really make a difference.”

Alessandro – IP: “I do not participate because, in one way or another, people come off worse. [The police always cause] trouble so people [won’t] speak of the real problem but of the incidents which happened during the protest. In this way, the initiative becomes useless.”

Rosaria – IP: “I believe that a march cannot change things, therefore ... we should probably try to find other ways, rather than protests, marches or sit-ins.”

The issue of the efficacy of political initiatives is strictly linked to citizens’ perception of the responsiveness of political institutions to their actions, which, in turn, relates to the issues of political disenchantment and democratic deficit (see Section 1.2). Qualitative data strongly confirmed the existence of a detachment from traditional political institutions and institutionalised forms of political participation, in particular in the IS. This phenomenon could be one of the reasons behind participants’ scepticism towards the efficacy of political initiatives, and their low levels of participation in mobilisation related activities.

[Detachment from traditional politics]:

Vincent – BP: “We get politicians and traditional media talking about apathy [but] I don’t think that people aren’t interested in politics or even that they are apathetic. I think that most people feel they don’t have a good choice in elections so they make the decision not to vote, even if they are quite engaged in politics themselves, because a lot of people don’t identify with any particular party.”

Rachel – BP: “Politics has become a dirty word ... joining a political party has become a discredited thing ironically at the same time ... membership of Protection of Birds, Friends of the Earth, national trusts and all those kinds of organisations has gone up. I think that to a very large extent people are expressing their politics through non-party political organisations.”

Mario – IP: “I feel strongly detached from institutional politics ... it is a common feeling, the so-called anti-politics, which in my opinion is not really anti-politics but rather a disaffection towards the political class.”

Raffaella – IP: “I am not very eager about politics because in Italy wherever you turn corruption comes up.”

Luca – IP: “I cannot identify my [political] ideas with current movements [and parties] and it is not worth participating in activities other than evaluation, information-gathering, etc.”

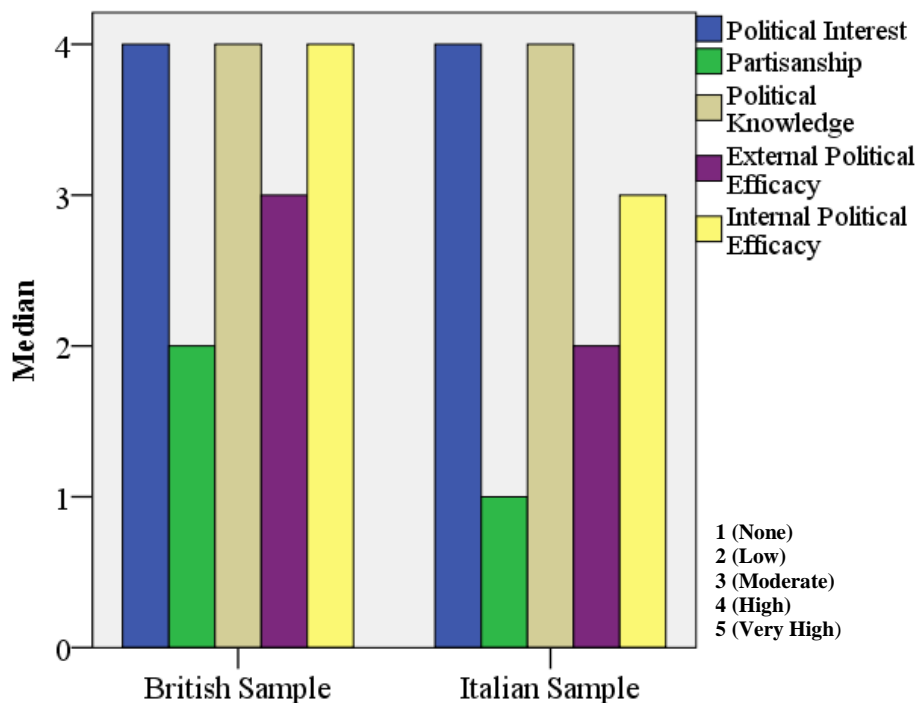
The detachment between participants and political institutions – evident in both samples but especially in the IS – which emerged in the interviews was corroborated by the quantitative samples’ composition in terms of party affiliation – with 46% of IPs and 33% of BPs claiming not to support any parties or movements (see Appendix C, Figures C5 and C6) – and the quantitative scores on the political engagement index. Political engagement was evaluated in the present research through five measures: political interest, political knowledge, partisanship, external and internal political efficacy (see Section 4.6.1, Table 2).

Table 10 – Political Engagement: Descriptive Statistics*

	British Sample		Italian Sample	
	Median	IQR	Median	IQR
Political Engagement	16	5	15	5
Political Interest	4	2	4	2
Partisanship	2	3	1	3
Political Knowledge	4	1	4	2
External Political Efficacy	3	1	2	2
Internal Political Efficacy	4	2	3	2

*Political Engagement index: 5 (None), 10 (Low), 15 (Moderate), 20 (High), 25 (Very high)
Measures of Political Engagement: 1 (None), 2 (Low), 3 (Moderate), 4 (High), 5 (Very high).

Figure 12 – Measures of Political Engagement: Bar Charts



As displayed in Table 10 and Figure 12:

- Both samples presented very similar levels of political engagement in terms of scores and distribution, with the BS slightly more politically engaged than the IS.
- In both samples, and particularly in the IS, the scores for partisanship and external political efficacy were lower than the ones for the other measures forming the political engagement index.

Among the measures composing the political engagement index, partisanship and external political efficacy (see Section 2.1.2 for a definition) are arguably the measures that best reflect the relationships between individuals, government, and political parties. The samples' lower scores on such measures confirmed the detachment between participants and political institutions. Considering this political disenchantment – which surfaced even more strongly in the interviews – and the costs (i.e., required resources) of mobilisation activities, qualitative data indicated that the contributions of Facebook to the mobilisation dimension tend to be limited to politically active individuals, with less politically active citizens employing this SNS mainly for political communication activities.

[More communication than mobilisation]:

Vincent – BP: “Mostly [Facebook] helps people to get information. People can form networks of friends with similar views and ... can share information so much easier.”

Ciro – IP: “[On Facebook] there is information but not much mobilisation.”

Martina – IP: “[Facebook appears to be more useful] in terms of communication. I don't know to what extent it can lead to the involvement in a political campaign ... There are people who participate politically through Facebook. They engage in political discussion, but then they don't go beyond their PCs. It is a huge step to pass from there to a square.”

With respect to the contributions of Facebook to the mobilisation dimension of political participation, interviews with British and Italian activists (i.e., individuals who displayed high levels of political mobilisation) attested to the relevance of Facebook in activists' political repertoires. In both samples activists stressed how Facebook has become a central, sometimes primary, tool for the organisation of political initiatives, a tool particularly suitable to single-issue campaigning. In addition, some participants commented on the capacity this SNS has to boost their mobilisation by exposing them to more information on political initiatives. This information was often related to local rather than national events, reaching them through grassroots channels, thus bypassing traditional political institutions such as parties or trade unions.

[Growing relevance of Facebook in activists' repertoires]:

Alastair – BP: “[Facebook] has become a more an integral part of a campaign. When I was involved in one election campaign, even few years ago, it was very traditional, whereas as soon as more recent campaigns happened the first thing we did was to assign a social media person so I think it has become an integral part of the campaign.”

Mario – IP: “Facebook has become the main communication channel [for activists] and many other tools used in the past ... have lost their importance.”

Francesca – IP: “[Within activist groups] Facebook has become the main means of communication – also because you can use it on mobiles as well as on computers, it is the fastest and cheapest method of communication.”

[Promoting grassroots single-issue mobilisation]:

Vincent – BP: “[Facebook] gives more power to ordinary people. Maybe 20 years ago most of this stuff was done in a formal party political way or through trade unions. Facebook has given much more ability to ordinary people who aren't affiliated to any bureau organisation to organise things for themselves, to communicate and to get on. So politics, political organisation has become more of a grassroots thing ... On Facebook people organise more at the grassroots level [and] on single-issue subjects ... and less along the parties' political lines.”

Rachel – BP: “Friends of Union Terrace Gardens which is a group set up to protect a Victorian Central Garden in central Aberdeen: [this] organisation largely started up on Facebook and as a Facebook group ... we set up a Facebook page and invite people to it, and that sort of Facebook page has remained our major channel of communication.”

Tracey – BP: “I am actually involved with an asthma charity in the UK which is quite concerned to get asthma recognised by more members of parliament and health officials. I am involved in petitions on that side ... and I think that [Facebook] was definitely very helpful with the campaign because it enabled us to reach far more people”.

Raffaella – IP: “I am part of an association that organises events in order to improve the tourism in our town ... The local leader of the 5 Stars Movement ... created a Facebook group [which became a message-board for our town] ... Our association organises events and through the Facebook group we keep in touch with each other and promote our initiatives... Everything started on Facebook.”

[More information on political initiatives]:

Hazel – BP: “Before Facebook I wouldn’t have known that [political] meetings were happening, so I wouldn’t have known to have an opportunity to attend so I have got more involved.”

Francesca – IP: “In certain ways I participate more [politically because of Facebook], in the way that I get to know about certain events ... so even if I don’t leave the house for five days, through Facebook I get to know if there is a political initiative happening.”

[Bypassing traditional mobilisation channels]:

Vincent – BP: “[Before Facebook] it was difficult [to get to know about political initiatives] because if you weren’t a member of some organisation, if you weren’t a member of a trade union or a political party, it could only be pot-luck really if you had found out there was some sort of rally.”

Luca – IP: “Probably [without Facebook I wouldn’t have known about many political initiatives], in particular events happening locally ... It would have been much harder to get this information through other channels. [On Facebook] information comes to you even if you don’t have a direct link with the [political] initiative ... [Facebook] is certainly one of the most powerful tools in creating a link between initiatives and people”

When discussing their usage of Facebook for political purposes, both British and Italian activists stressed the relationship between Facebook and offline participation, describing political activity on Facebook as rooted in and supporting their offline activity.

[Interdependence between Facebook and offline political participation]:

Mario – IP: “[Facebook] participation is the cause, the organisation, while the effect is offline participation.”

Francesca – IP: “I think that Facebook supports political entities which already exist ... the online cannot exist without the offline, while the offline could survive without the online.”

Antonio – IP: “I could not engage in politics only on Facebook or online, but also I could not engage in politics using only the old methods ... I think that Facebook is a very useful tool, in certain cases essential, but not sufficient on its own ... Without offline organisation, including small practical things such as requesting a square [for a rally], printing the flyers, organising a press conference, etc. ... [online activism] cannot work.”

Hazel – BP: “[I use Facebook to promote offline political initiatives]. I have created [Facebook] events for next Saturday ... trying to make local people aware of the dangers of the privatisation of the NHS and how they can get involved locally.”

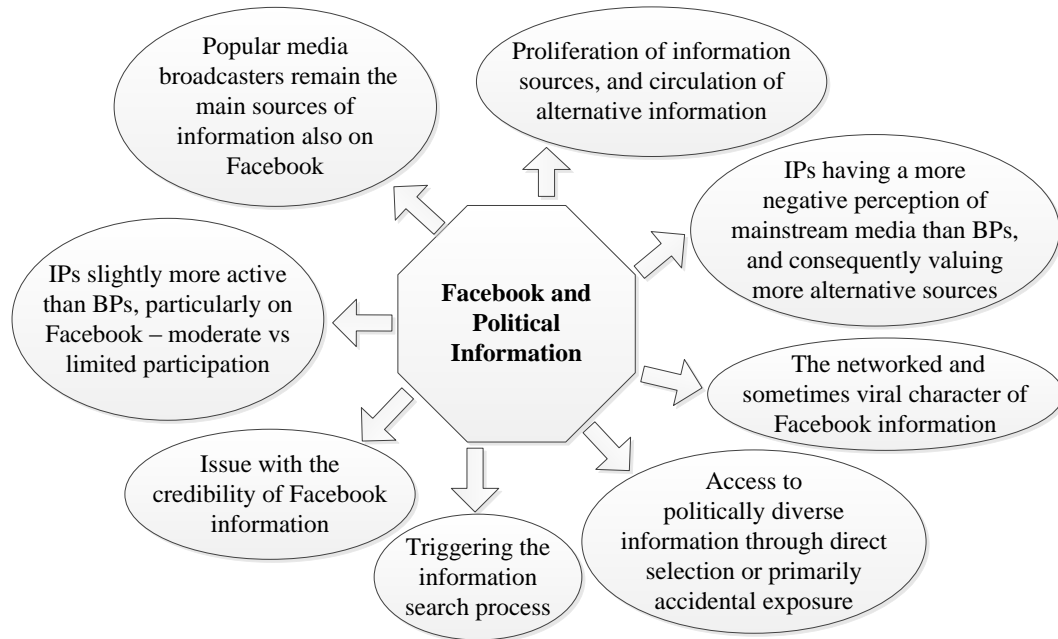
In conclusion, as was the case for the more general measures of political participation considered in the previous chapter, so in relation to political communication and mobilisation, IPs were slightly more active than BPs, particularly on Facebook. Both samples engaged more often in political communication activities than in mobilisation ones – moderate vs limited or no participation –, a trend confirmed in all three considered participation channels. The qualitative data suggested two main reasons behind such a difference. The first is that political communication activities are less resource-expensive (e.g., less demanding in terms of time) than the ones falling within the mobilisation dimension. The second reason is the scepticism shown by BPs and IPs towards the efficacy of political initiatives, with participants – in particular IPs – expressing disenchantment and distrust towards the political establishment and doubting its responsiveness to their actions.

The qualitative data revealed that, given the costs in terms of resources and perception of the efficacy of mobilisation activities, the contributions of Facebook to the mobilisation dimension tend to remain limited to participants who are already politically active, with less politically active participants employing this SNS mainly for political communication activities. Facebook emerged as a key tool in activists’ political repertoires, often replacing other online platforms and offline methods used to communicate, organise and promote political initiatives.

5.2.2 Research Question 2.2 – Facebook and the consumption of political information

RQ 2.2: How does Facebook contribute to British and Italian citizens' consumption of political information?

Figure 13 – Facebook and Political Information: Main Findings



Similarly to the more general measures of political participation, the relevance of Facebook as a political information source for BPs and IPs was assessed by comparing the samples' consumption of political information across the considered channels.

Table 11 – Political Information: Descriptive Statistics*

	British Sample		Italian Sample	
	Median	IQR	Median	IQR
Facebook Political Information	6	6	9	7
Internet Political Information	7	6	8.50	7
Offline Political Information	6	3	7.83**	5

*3 (Never), 6 (Rarely), 9 (Sometimes), 12 (Often), 15 (Very often).

** The peculiar value in the IS is due to the fact that one of the measures composing the Offline Political Information scale, namely "Consumption of political news offline" is an average measure generated by combining three questionnaire items measuring respectively TV, radio and press consumption of political news (see Appendix E).

Figure 14 – Facebook, Internet and Offline Political Information: Box Plots

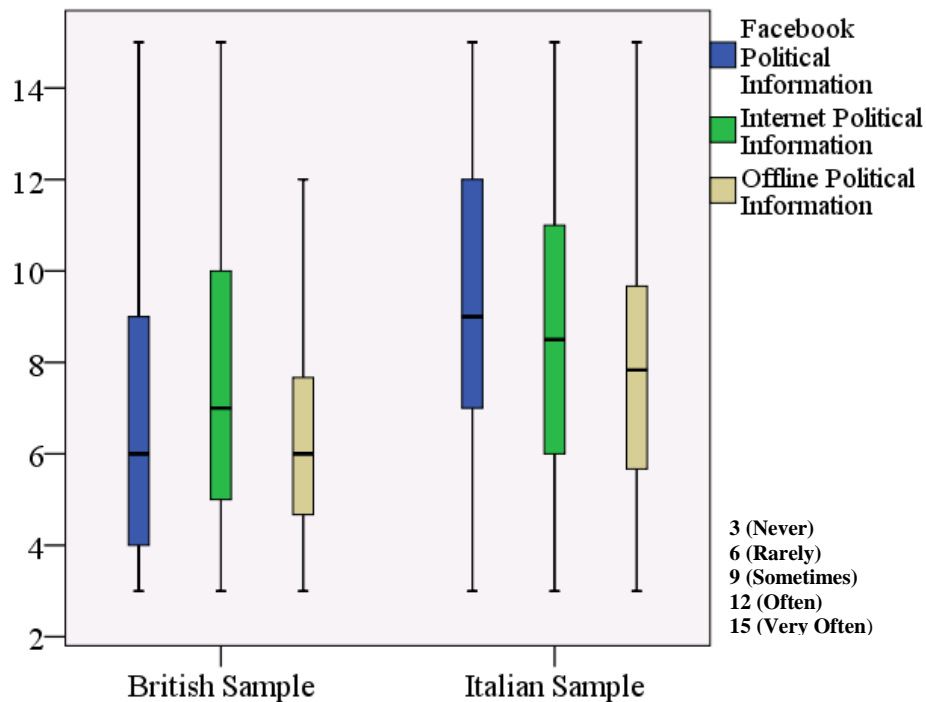


Table 11 and Figure 14 indicate that two trends already highlighted in relation to the measures of political participation considered so far emerged also for this type of activity:

- IPs consumed more political information than the BPs, particularly on Facebook. The levels of consumption of political information were limited for the BS and moderate for the IS.
- In both samples, the differences among the considered information channels were limited. Facebook was the most used source for political information in the IS, while for the BS the most used source was the Internet.
- The main difference from the political participation measures considered so far occurred in the IS. While for the other political participation measures IPs scored the lowest in the Internet-related measures, in this case the least used political information sources were the offline ones (i.e., television, the press and the radio). It also has to be noted in this case that the differences between the various channels were minor.

The contributions of Facebook to the consumption of political information were further explored through the qualitative data. Interviews highlighted the relevance, advantages and limitations of Facebook as a political information source and shed light on the nature of the political information circulating within this SNS. With regards to the relevance of Facebook as a political information source, qualitative data confirmed the higher usage of this SNS by IPs. The interviews produced a more positive picture than that which arose out of the quantitative data, with both BPs and IPs acknowledging the value of Facebook as a source of political information. In this sense, two main findings emerged. One relates to the Internet in its totality, and is the increasing importance of online information sources in citizens' information diet. The other refers to the specific case of Facebook, and is the capacity this SNS has to foster the consumption of political information.

With regards to the first finding, from all of the interviews it was evident that the Internet has become a dominant component in participants' informational diet, in some cases entirely replacing offline sources. The qualitative data suggested that the flexibility and speed of online information, the variety of online sources, and the interactive nature of online information are instrumental to the success of this medium.

[The flexibility and speed of online information]:

Alex – BP: “I used to buy [newspapers] a lot [but] now I hardly buy them. I read them online. I can read them on my telephone as well when I'm on the bus.”

Kaye – BP: “[Online news is] a lot faster than television news. [I like that] because it gives you the feeling that's what's happening right now.”

Carmela – IP: “I rarely follow news on TV – I prefer it online. It is easier for me as I am always using smartphones and I am not home very often.”

[The variety of online sources]:

Helen – BP: “I prefer Facebook [and] online sources because online [information] is not just coming from one source. You can check different sources instead of just watching the news which is one source.”

Antonio – IP: “The world of online information is terribly richer in terms of offers and expertise. [Sources] which are not valued in mainstream media find expression thanks to the free nature of the web.”

[The interactive nature of online information]:

Lesley – BP: “I’d usually use newspaper websites if I have to find something specific because ... through the archives you can find something quite easily, whereas it would be very difficult looking through ... a pile of newspapers.”

Helen – BP: “[Online] you can choose the articles you want to read, with the news you have to watch everything.”

Raffaella – IP: “[Online] there is a greater exchange of news: you can comment on a news piece, you can share it.”

Concerning the specific case of Facebook, this SNS certainly contributed to the diffusion of political information in the considered samples. Some particularly enthusiastic participants depicted Facebook as a powerful tool which operates as an *information catalyst*. Facebook gathers information originating from many different sources and, through various modes of communication (e.g., sharing, liking, commenting, etc.), conveys this information to a multitude of users. The qualitative data suggested a number of reasons behind the informative power of Facebook: the proliferation of sources, with numerous users operating as information broadcaster; the networked and, sometimes, viral character of Facebook information; and the capability of this SNS to trigger the information search process.

[Facebook and proliferation of sources]:

Rachel – BP: “[Facebook] has broadened the sources and taken them closer ... to the actual source.”

Ciro – IP: “By being connected on Facebook, it is as if we can open a window on the world from which we can obtain all possible information and not only the 50, 100 news stories that we can get through TV news programs.”

Alessandro – IP: “Through Facebook, sometimes I read articles that I would have never came across ... because a friend can post articles [from] pages and newspapers I don’t follow.”

Raffaella – IP: “Whether you want it or not, on Facebook you [see information about politics] as everyone publishes political news constantly.”

[The networked nature of Facebook information]:

Vincent – BP: “[On Facebook] you will find people who will post the same article you would come across on a website or TV, but you would also find a larger variation ... The participation of so many people means that you get a larger net cast on the Internet ... I read stuff from sites that I wouldn’t have known even existed if a friend or another person, a friend of friend, hadn’t found it and posted it [on Facebook].”

Antonio – IP: “Social networks are able to fill informative gaps that sometimes not even the web can touch. It is easier to find a news story by quickly logging into Facebook than going to look for it in the ocean of the web.”

[Viral information on Facebook]:

Luigi – IP: “It’s like when you go fishing. [On Facebook], instead of using one fishing rod you use many of them. There’s the news I get and the news my contacts get. Therefore, there is an invasion of news.”

Ciro – IP: “It is a sort of media contagion. Information and communication travel on increasingly extended tracks: the information that should go from A to B is read by C, a third individual who interacts with A. Consequently, new connections are born according to the topics rather than people’s will.”

[Facebook as activator of the information search process]:

Ellie – BP: “Sometimes if I see a post on Facebook I may go on the BBC website and look at the news. Facebook is not really my main source of information [but sometimes it] triggers something.”

Francesca – IP: “Through Facebook you can obtain [political] information ... you read a status update and then you go to look for information related to that status update.”

Ciro – IP: “[On Facebook] it can happen that by opening a link from La Repubblica I see articles from that website on the side bar. In this way I am consulting La Repubblica even if I didn’t connect to the Internet with that intent ... it is about the hyper-textual navigation”

If the main advantages of Facebook in terms of political information are linked to the proliferation of sources, the networked nature of information, and the ability to trigger the information search process, the main limitation – which was strongly evident from both

British and Italian interviews – concerns the credibility of the information circulating within this SNS. Both samples acknowledged the abundance of bogus information, and highlighted the issue of credibility of Facebook sources, in particular the credibility of those sources not associated with popular media broadcasters.

[Issues of credibility of Facebook political information]:

Lesley – BP: “[On Facebook] there are so many things that are urban myths ... I think a lot of the causes [you find on there] are urban myths too and so I like to take time to have a look at some of the websites and check where the things are coming from.”

Kaye – BP: “Newspapers have to go over [the sources] they get their stories from and make sure to some extent that these are as much as possible true whereas [on Facebook] people can write any odd thing and ... lots of people would probably believe it.”

Luca – IP: “Facebook pays a price which is linked to its success. In my experience the so-called fakes – pictures that are not real, information that is not real, news that is not real – are certainly present.”

After assessing the advantages and limitations of Facebook as information source, the interviews explored the nature of political information circulating on this SNS. Qualitative data indicated the presence on this SNS of information coming from both mainstream media and alternative sources, the different perceptions that the two samples tend to have of mainstream media, and the potential for exposure to conflicting political information on Facebook.

In relation to this last issue, interviews illustrated that individuals can be exposed to political difference through Facebook. This finding is particularly valuable because, as highlighted in sections 3.2 and 3.3, one of the most common criticisms of the Internet concerns its tendency to promote selective exposure, with Internet users operating in echo-chambers (Sunstein 2001). In the interviews, BPs and IPs confirmed that on Facebook they often obtained information in line with their political beliefs. Nonetheless, they also acknowledged that they may be exposed to conflicting political information, either directly, by selecting contrasting sources themselves, or accidentally. In the latter case, the News Feed plays a crucial role as it enables users to passively view the activities of their network. The interviews revealed that when users obtain information accidentally, they are more likely to be exposed to conflicting political views than when they purposefully search for information.

[Exposure to pro-attitudinal political information]

Antonio – IP: “Both offline and on Facebook, 80%, 90% of the time I obtain [political information] from sources which hold the same political views as I do.”

[Exposure to political difference on Facebook]:

Kaye – BP: “[On Facebook] I came across people with completely opposing views.”

Helen – BP: “I think seeing [through Facebook] that people have [different] views, maybe kind of pushes you to look for things, to seek out alternative news, or to the develop a view on it.”

Luigi – IP: “Facebook has no filters. I have more than 1000 contacts ... I know the political views of 20% of those contacts while I have no idea for the rest. [On Facebook] you have a surplus of news which comes from everywhere.”

Giuliano – IP: “I have two, three [Facebook] contacts that [hold political views completely opposite to mine].”

[Exposure to political difference through active selection]:

Antonio – IP: “I understand that on certain issues I also need to see how different political forces think and act. For this reason, sometimes I look for [politically diverse] information sources.”

[Accidental exposure to political difference]:

Kaye – BP: “I didn’t particularly seek out [contrasting political information] but now [through Facebook] it comes to me.”

Mario – IP: “Facebook provides [information] as soon as you log in. Even if you don’t want you see this information. Therefore, because this information is imposed, in the sense that you don’t look anymore for information but the information is there and you see it ... your information is widened and [more politically diverse] in comparison to the past.”

However, interviews showed that not all Facebook users were able to gain access to counter-attitudinal political information, and that the presence of a politically-heterogeneous network of contacts was instrumental to the accidental exposure to political difference. Nonetheless, the exposure to political difference is not guaranteed by the presence of politically

heterogeneous contacts, as interaction with such contacts is also required. This is linked to the way the News Feed works and specifically to the EdgeRank algorithm (see Section 2.4, p. 36). As a result of the EdgeRank algorithm, if a user does not interact with a contact over a certain period of time, this contact's activities will stop appearing in the News Feed. Consequently, as highlighted by a BP, lack of interaction could limit the exposure to politically diverse information.

[Interaction and exposure to political difference]:

Callum – BP: “[On Facebook] I get a certain [political] range but not that bigger range. [This is] partly because Facebook tends to hide from me the people I don't interact with. [Among my Facebook contacts] there are probably people who have different political views to me but I don't really talk to them”.

The interviews also shed light on another aspect of political information circulating on Facebook, namely the balance between mainstream and alternative sources in participants' Facebook informational diet. Qualitative data attested to the presence on this SNS of information coming from a variety of sources, ranging from mainstream and established media to alternative sources such as blogs and Facebook pages. BPs consumed political information coming mainly from established sources (e.g., BBC, the Guardian, etc.) A similar pattern emerged among IPs, who nonetheless attributed greater relevance to alternative sources than their British counterparts. In this sense, IPs stressed the user-generated nature of this information and the fact that it appears to be free from the influence of traditional media and political institutions.

[Presence of established media institutions on Facebook]:

Vincent – BP: “[On Facebook] I think that most people are still using the traditional sources for their information ... and they are using Facebook as a means to [distribute] that information, maybe, to a broader range of people.”

Alastair – BP: “The Independent, the Guardian and BBC News are the ones that get posted the most [on Facebook].”

Alessandro – IP: “[On Facebook I] find news from [popular newspapers] such as Il Mattino or La Repubblica.”

[Facebook as source of alternative information]:

Kaye – BP: “I would definitely say that on Facebook [you can find] stuff that is not necessarily reported ... It happens more that people pick up on little stories, like an MP who has claimed so much on expenses, and just share them among people ... Probably a newspaper will not do it in that way because Facebook is a lot more informal I would say.”

Tracey – BP: “On Facebook, often people are posting from websites that are not necessarily mainstream so it is not from the Guardian, the Times or the Daily Mail or even the BBC, and you can often get quite different types of stories, perhaps ones that are more informal or something like that.”

Giuliano – IP: “I imagine Facebook as a big container, a newspaper that is not made by the political establishment which is clearly self-referential and tries to promote its positions. I see it as a huge multimedia container made by the people for the people ... to share contents that can be of interest for common people and therefore that are not imposed.”

Alessandro – IP: “[The news] is always distorted in TV, radio and even online newspapers. Maybe they don’t tell you something, they tell you only what they want, while when you go on Facebook you see people who know about politics and you see that they know about stuff that TV, radios and newspapers often don’t say.”

In the considered samples it seemed, therefore, that Italians attributed greater value to alternative sources than their British counterparts. This could have been due to BPs’ and IPs’ different perceptions of traditional and established media institutions which were evident from the interviews. IPs were more sceptical of mainstream media, particularly TV, than BPs. They often questioned the independence of mainstream media from the political establishment, depicting Facebook and the Internet in general as realms immune to the *corrupting* influence of politics. The picture was more mixed in the BS, with some participants describing established media institutions such as the BBC as reliable and objective, and others expressing a more disenchanted and oppositional view.

[Negative perception of established media institutions]:

Lesley – BP: “In this country, people have this assumption that the BBC is squeaky clean and beautiful and impartial and will give them very thorough information on everything ... That really annoys me and ... over the last decade with the involvement of Britain along with the United States in the Middle East, in Afghanistan and Iraq [it became very clear that this is not the case].”

Andrew – BP: “[I tend to stay away from mainstream media] because it’s politically motivated, and it shouldn’t be really – it should be impartial and I don’t think that it is.”

Giuliano – IP: “The [Berlusconi’s] government had almost total control over information and the people who wanted to know more had to go online.”

Antonio – IP: “In Italy, official information is in the hands of a limited number of businesses, financial and industrial groups, and the space for necessary information is limited. Online, there is a much wider space where people can find and produce information.”

[Support for established media institutions]:

Vincent – BP: “You hear people complain that newspapers are all owned by rich capitalists and the BBC is maybe not totally independent as it should be. So people do complain about the state of the media in the UK, maybe a little bit unfairly, as I think it’s relatively free in the UK compared to some places.”

Kaye – BP: “I would say that any news channel worth its salt will definitely try to make sure that they weren’t so biased that they were actually wrecking the story ... I would say definitely the BBC, they always try to be fair.”

Hilary – BP: “I only go to a proper source like the BBC.”

Alastair – BP: “I would recognise bias and I would look for it just to see if I thought the source was a bit biased one way or the other, but also I never suspected that the government has control of the stations here.”

The samples’ different perceptions of mainstream media, in particular TV, could also account for their different scores in terms of media usage time (see Section 5.3.3, Table 16, for samples’ Facebook usage time).

Table 12 – Media Usage Time: Descriptive Statistics*

	British Sample		Italian Sample	
	Median	IQR	Median	IQR
TV Usage Time	3	1	2	1
Radio Usage Time	2	0	2	1
Press Usage Time	2	1	2	1
Internet Usage Time**	3	1	3	2

* 1(None at all), 2 (Less than 1 hour), 3 (1 to 3 hours), 4 (3 to 5 hours), 5 (More than 5 hours).

** Internet Usage Time does not include the time spent on Facebook.

As Table 12 indicates, the two samples in fact displayed the same scores in relation to the various media, except for TV, with IPs watching less TV than BPs. It is interesting to see how in both samples the Internet (in the BS in conjunction with TV) was the most used medium.

To summarise, scores for the consumption of political information were consistent with scores for the other measures of political participation: IPs were slightly more active than BPs – moderate vs limited participation, particularly on Facebook. Both samples valued digital sources of information, and recognised that Facebook can contribute to the diffusion of political information by operating as an information catalyst. Data suggested that the informative power of Facebook rests on the proliferation of information sources, the networked and sometimes viral character of Facebook information, and the SNSs' capacity to trigger the information search process. On the other hand, its main limitation is linked to the credibility of information circulated on Facebook, with participants highlighting the abundance of bogus information and unreliable sources.

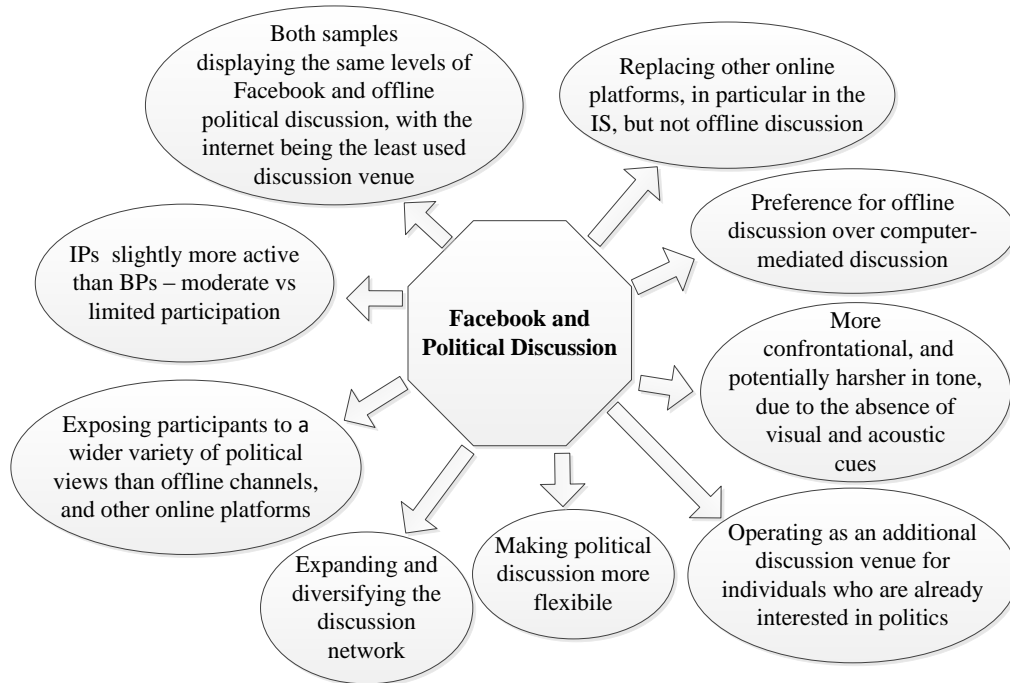
With regards to the nature of Facebook information, both BPs and IPs stressed that they can obtain politically diverse information through this SNS, by actively selecting to access such information or, more frequently, by being accidentally exposed to it. Data suggested that in order for accidental exposure to occur, the presence of a politically heterogeneous Facebook network – and interaction with such a network – is needed.

Finally, both samples confirmed the presence of information originating from popular media broadcasters and information arising from alternative sources (e.g. blogs, Facebook pages). Both samples tended to consume mainly political information from established sources, but IPs seemed to value alternative sources more than their British counterparts. This is most likely linked to IPs' more negative perception of mainstream media, of TV in particular.

5.2.3 Research Question 2.3 – Facebook and political discussion

RQ 2.3: How does Facebook contribute to British and Italian citizens' political discussion?

Figure 15 – Facebook and Political Discussion: Main Findings



As with the other measures of political participation used, the samples' scores for political discussion were compared across the three considered channels.

Table 13 – Political Discussion: Descriptive Statistics*

	British Sample		Italian Sample	
	Median	IQR	Median	IQR
Facebook Political Discussion	2	2	3	3
Internet Political Discussion	1	2	1	2
Offline Political Discussion	2	2	3	3

*1 (Never), 2 (Rarely), 3 (Sometimes), 4 (Often), 5 (Very often).

Table 13 demonstrates the following:

- As seen in the other measures of political participation, the IS exhibited slightly higher scores (i.e., moderate) than the BS (i.e., limited).
- The main difference between these scores and the other measures of political participation relates to how the scores were distributed across the channels. Both

samples displayed the lowest possible level of Internet political discussion, while scoring the same with regards to Facebook and offline political discussion.

The quantitative results were supported by the qualitative data. Participants observed that Facebook frequently replaced other online platforms, in particular in the IS, but did not become a substitute for offline discussion. In relation to this last point, Facebook operated as an additional discussion venue for individuals already interested in politics. These participants deemed Facebook a valuable tool that can increase the frequency of political discussion. Furthermore, interviewees identified a number of possible reasons behind the capacity Facebook has for promoting political discussion: the flexibility of Facebook – it can be accessed throughout the day from both computers and mobiles, enabling users to fit political discussions into their daily schedules (another reference to the flexibility of Facebook as a political platform is made in Section 5.1.2); the constant exposure to political information and news shared by politically interested Facebook friends; and the expansion and diversification of the discussion network.

[Flexibility and exposure to political information]:

Alastair – BP: “I’ll say I’ve become more involved in political discussion because of [Facebook as] you can access it any time, while you are not always with people who want to have political discussions ... I hang around with a lot of political friends; they constantly post articles, views and things.”

Tracey – BP: “I am much more involved with the political discussions online because [of Facebook]. [One of its advantages it is that] as soon as somebody posts an article you can go and read it and then write a response to it, whereas if you are looking at newspapers you maybe won’t remember to discuss a particular article or something that you have seen with somebody if they are not there at the time.”

[Expanding and diversifying the discussion network]:

Tracey – BP: “Because I really use Facebook as a means to stay in contact with people I no longer see, whether because they live in another country or they have moved on ... [on Facebook I tend to communicate] more generally with people that actually I don’t have face-to-face contact with.”

Mario IP: “[Facebook] is a tool which opens the discussion up to people you wouldn’t have spoken with offline ... it can happen that you communicate with people you don’t meet every day, but only talk to digitally.”

Antonio – IP: “[Facebook] has increased the number of people I can reach. It enabled me to build a network of relations that I didn’t have before, or only had in a limited way because I would have to travel or use the phone [to communicate with them].”

Ciro – IP: “[On Facebook] when you say something, you speak – so to say – to seven hundred people rather than to three people ... When a political discussion happens on Facebook, very often people who are contacts of my interlocutors and are not my friends tend to join in.”

The expansion of the discussion network, which participants highlighted as one of the greatest affordances of this SNS in terms of political discussion, plays a crucial role with regards to the exposure to political difference, an issue addressed also on the previous section. In this respect, participants recognised that by discussing politics with a wider range of people, often including people they would not normally have any interaction with, they tended to be exposed on Facebook to more varied political views than they would be offline, and on other Internet platforms such as forums or discussion lists.

[A more politically diverse discussion network]:

Rachel – BP: “[On Facebook I] probably discuss [politics] with a slightly different population [from] when I discussed within the sort of closed [Internet] forums ... I think Facebook has broadened [the discussion in comparison to] these sorts of closed forums and closed discussion lists [as there is a] much wider breadth of people.”

Alastair – BP: “[On Facebook] I tend to comment on friends’ statuses and their friends can get involved, especially if it’s a page or an event because it’s so public and there is lots of different views coming in. So [in these occasions] I talk to people with more different views than myself.”

Martina – IP: “On Facebook you tend more [than offline] to interact with people who think differently from you. On the other hand, in a political meeting taking place outside the Internet, meeting people face-to-face, it’s clear you’ll meet people who think like you.”

Luigi – IP: “Offline discussion, with some exceptions, is often limited to persons who think like you, whereas online you have a global village where you can interact with a bigger and more diverse range of people.”

However, despite the fact that participants acknowledged the value of Facebook and the Internet as additional venues for political discussion, most of them stressed their preference for offline discussion over computer-mediated discussion. Both BPs and IPs noted the more confrontational nature of online discussion and how not being able to interpret a person’s body language or tone of voice, the way you could in a face-to-face interaction, can often lead to misunderstandings and to harsher and more aggressive dialectical exchanges. In this regard, an IP made a very interesting point and spoke of *right of inclusion* with reference to the limited control Facebook users have over their public conversations and on the people who can intervene.

[Limited control over discussion and its participants]:

Luca – IP: “There is a difference between face-to-face and online discussion. I would call it the right of inclusion. If I talk to an individual about politics, I wilfully chose to talk with that particular person. At some point, if another person ... interferes in our discussion both of us have to agree that he can participate ... Therefore, in face-to-face discussion, the participants’ control is extremely high. The problem with online discussion, which is characterised by a freer access, is that ... the possibility of someone interfering is much higher ... In offline communication, I select the participants, set the tone and I can choose how to direct the conversation, [but it is] very difficult to do this online.”

[Harsher and more aggressive tones online]:

Tracey – BP: “On Facebook ... I think there is a tendency that people will anticipate what the person is going to say next and then be quite aggressive in their tone, and that has happened to me before where I have been discussing something and then the person which I have been discussing [it] with has become very aggressive because I can’t see their point of view or my opinion is different from theirs.”

Callum – BP: “Face-to-face discussions are very different from online discussions. [Online] it’s sometimes possible to be misunderstood [because these types of interactions] don’t fully include the tone of voice.”

Martina – IP: “The visual contact is important because often misunderstandings happen on the web. You don’t hear the tone of voice. For instance, I am a person who uses irony a lot and I have to be careful when I write because if I joke in a certain way and a person can’t see my face or hear the tone of my voice, he can get offended. [On Facebook] I have been targeted and people intervened in the discussions to harass me and I had to block them ... I use my real name, surname, and picture but some people create fake profiles and they feel protected because they are anonymous, and know that they can offend because they will not face the consequences.”

Ciro – IP: “The communication mediated by computers and which happens through social networks [such as Facebook] exaggerates a series of dynamics which lead to confrontation. This is because when a person writes, he concentrates on replying to what has been said by the other person, without considering the facial expressions, the smiles, the natural pauses which occur in the spoken language, and therefore there is a ping pong of sharp replies which can sometimes appear harsh and stir up troubles in the long run.”

The samples thus identified the physical absence, and consequently the absence of visual and acoustic cues in conversation, as the main difference between online and offline discussions. According to participants, such a difference can often lead to misunderstandings and confrontation. However, the physical absence in online conversation was not unanimously considered detrimental to the quality of discussion, with some participants believing that it could actually foster greater honesty and encourage participation.

[More honesty and participation in online discussion]:

Alastair – BP: “I prefer [discussing politics] online only because if you are in a discussion with someone and you do it face-to-face, it is easy to get too involved.”

Andrew – BP: “I think you can be a lot more open online ... It’s difficult to talk to people about [certain] things whereas online you can say whatever crazy [thing] you want.”

Ciro – IP: “It seems that [online] more people feel that they can express an opinion. This is due to the lack of direct contact, as if they can avoid a negative look or comment people tend to speak up more”

To conclude, similarly to all the considered measures of political participation, IPs participated slightly more than BPs in political discussions – moderate vs limited participation. The difference with the other measures was that for both BPs and IPs the

Internet was the least used venue for political discussion, while Facebook and the offline world were equivalent in terms of scores.

Interviews indicated that Facebook can contribute to political discussion by operating as an additional discussion venue for individuals already interested in politics. Facebook often replaced other online platforms, in particular in the IS, but did not become a substitute for offline discussion. Participants who used this SNS for political discussion highlighted how it could promote their participation by providing flexibility and expanding and diversifying their discussion networks. As a result, participants believed that they encountered a wider range of political views through Facebook than they would offline or through other online platforms. Despite these advantages, both BPs and IPs tended to prefer offline discussion to computer-mediated discussion. Participants stressed the benefits of body language and tone of voice as communication aids in face-to-face discussion, noting the often more confrontational nature of online discussion, in which the absence of visual and acoustic cues can often lead to misunderstandings and to harsher, more aggressive exchanges. Nonetheless, some participants seemed to value such a physical absence arguing that it can promote honesty and encourage wider participation in political discussion.

5.3 Research Question 3 – Factors Mediating the Contributions of Facebook to Political Participation

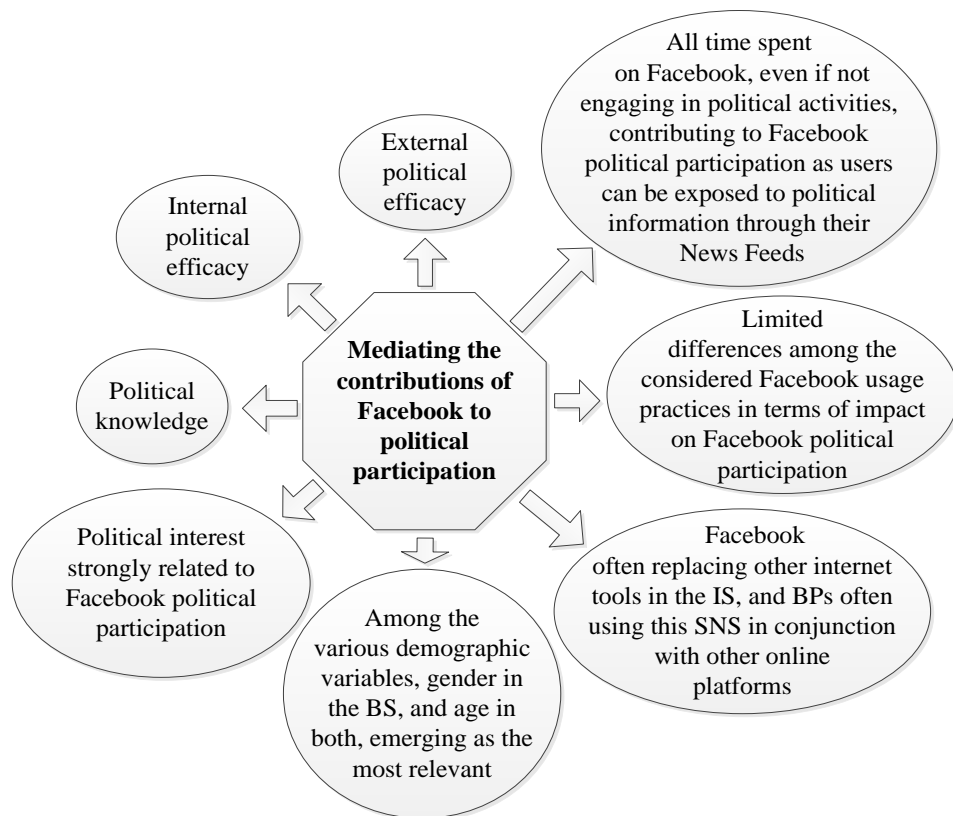
RQ 3: What are the factors mediating the contributions of Facebook to British and Italian citizens' political participation?

RQ 3.1: How do demographic factors such as gender, age, education and occupation impact upon the links between Facebook and political participation?

RQ 3.2: How does political engagement mediate the contributions of Facebook to political participation?

RQ 3.3: How do the time spent on Facebook, the relevance of this SNS in people's lives, Facebook non-political activity and different non-political usage practices (information vs communication vs social recreation) mediate the contributions of this SNS to political participation?

Figure 16 – Factors Mediating the Contributions of Facebook to Political Participation: Main Findings



5.3.1 Research Question 3.1 – Demographic variables and political participation

RQ 3.1: How do demographic factors such as gender, age, education and occupation impact upon the links between Facebook and political participation?

As outlined in Appendix C, the samples were consistent in terms of age range, but differed in regard to gender, education and occupation. BPs had higher educational and occupational levels than IPs, and the BS consisted of a higher percentage of women than the IS (63% vs 47%). In order to assess the relationship between political participation and these variables a correlation analysis was run.

Table 14 – Political Participation and Demographic Variables: Correlation Analysis – Cramer's V*

			Facebook Political Participation	Internet Political Participation	Offline Political Participation
British Sample	Gender	Cramer's V Value	.480	.515	.461
		Approx. Sig.	.048	.010	.075
	Age	Cramer's V Value	.442	.426	.408
		Approx. Sig.	.063	.156	.268
	Education	Cramer's V Value	.455	.402	.434
		Approx. Sig.	.012	.418	.046
	Occupation	Cramer's V Value	.384	.391	.371
		Approx. Sig.	.740	.623	.829
Italian Sample	Gender	Cramer's V Value	.415	.443	.430
		Approx. Sig.	.748	.361	.459
	Age	Cramer's V Value	.493	.422	.450
		Approx. Sig.	.075	.572	.224
	Education	Cramer's V Value	.473	.387	.449
		Approx. Sig.	.193	.951	.198
	Occupation	Cramer's V Value	.452	.437	.455
		Approx. Sig.	.489	.332	.094

* Significant correlations in bold.

As Table 14 shows:

- In the two samples all demographic variables were either moderately or largely correlated to the three considered scales of political participation.
- Among the various correlations, only four in the BS (i.e., gender with Facebook and Internet political participation, and education with Facebook and offline political participation) were statistically significant.
- Focusing on Facebook political participation, the main difference between the samples emerged in relation to gender. Among the considered demographic variables, gender displays the largest correlation with Facebook political

participation in the BS, whereas in the IS it is the variable with the smallest correlation.

As correlation analysis does not show the directions of correlations, a series of graphs was produced to display the samples' political participation scores in relation to the various categories of gender, age, education, and occupation, in order to understand how the various demographic variables related to political participation (see Section 4.6.1 and Appendix C for an explanation of the various categories).

Figure 17 – Facebook Political Participation by Gender: Box Plots

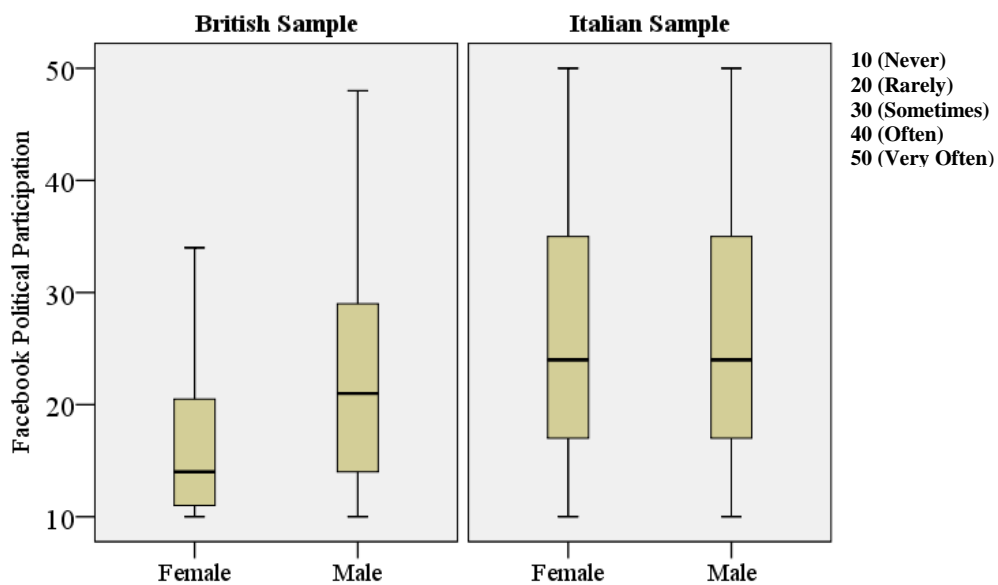


Figure 18 – Facebook Political Participation by Age: Box Plots

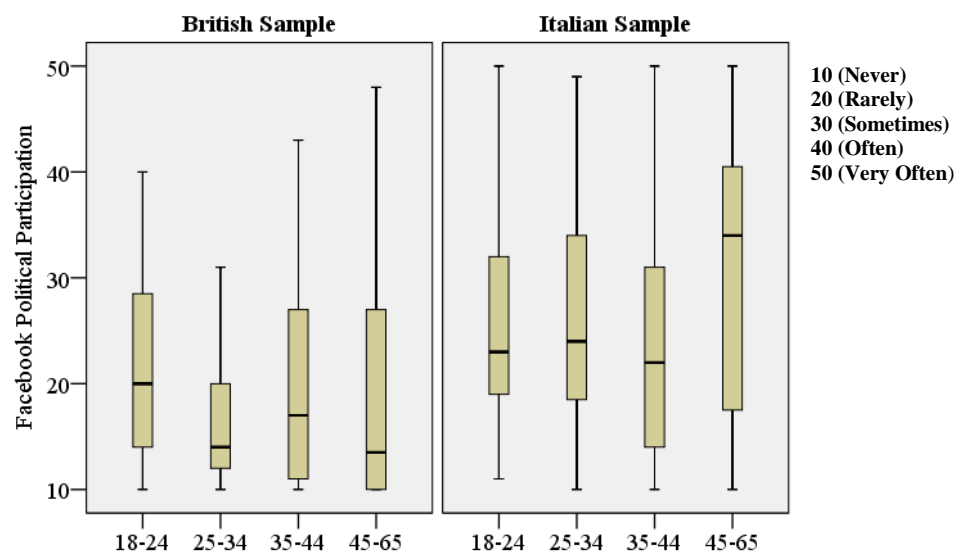


Figure 19 – Facebook Political Participation by Occupation: Box Plots

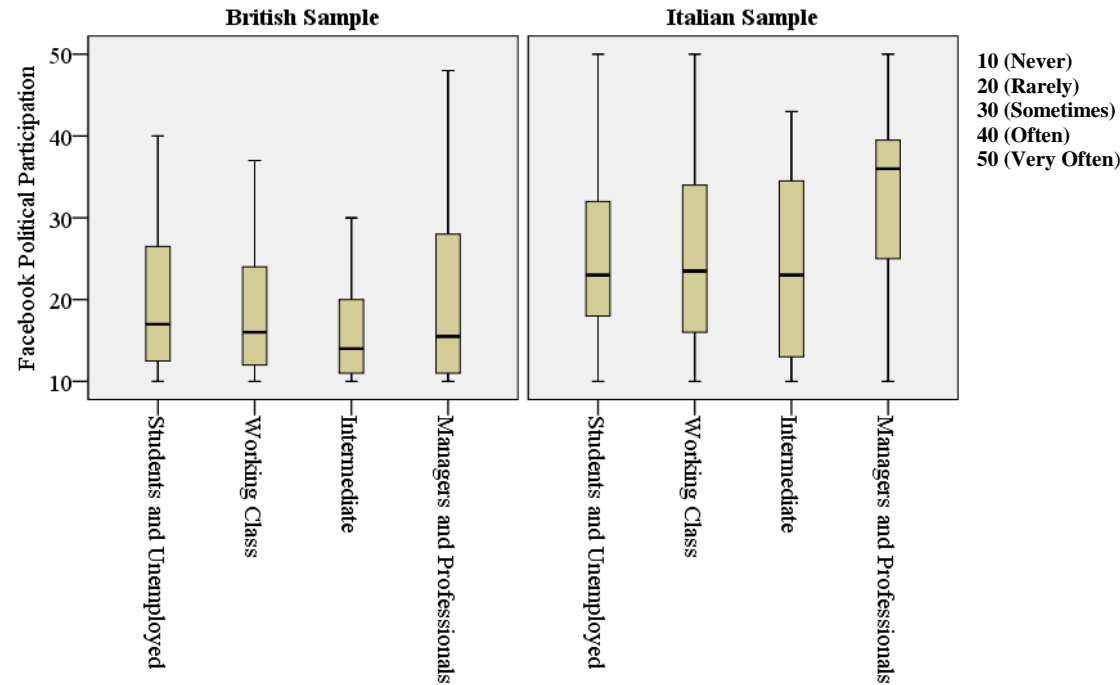
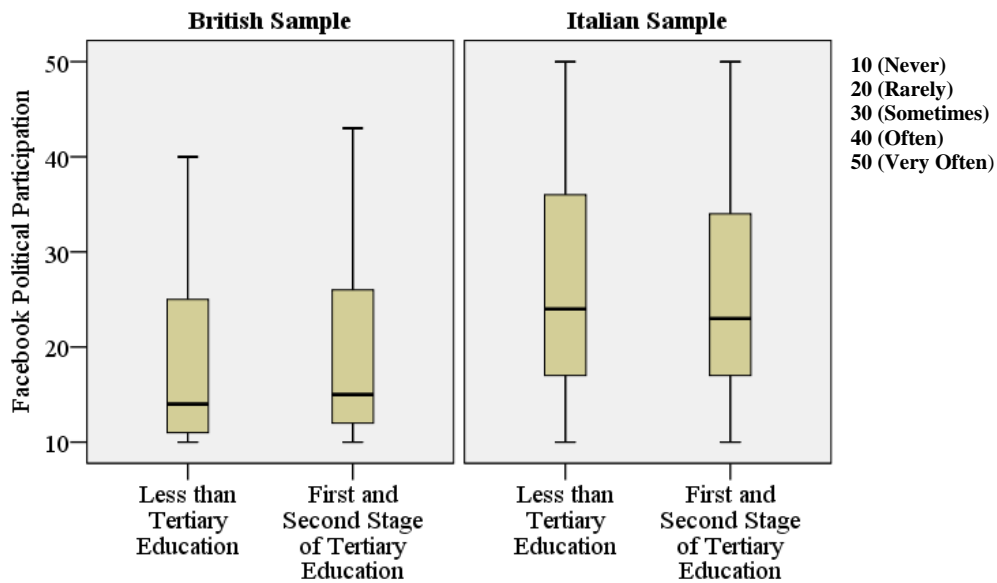


Figure 20 – Facebook Political Participation by Education: Box Plots



The previous four figures indicate that in terms of Facebook political participation:

- In the BS males were more politically active than females. This participatory gap between males and females did not emerge in the IS.
- In the IS older people (i.e., 45-65) participated more than younger ones, while a clear pattern could not be identified in the BS.
- In the IS, participants falling within the managers and professionals category displayed higher levels of participation than the ones falling within the other occupational categories. As with age ranges, a clear pattern within the range of occupations could not be identified in the BS.
- In both samples, no relevant differences were evident in relation to the two considered educational categories.

Considering the higher levels of participation of British male participants, the gender discrepancy between the samples (i.e., higher percentage of females in the BS) could be one of the reasons behind the samples' different levels of political participation (i.e., IPs were slightly more active than BPs, particularly on Facebook). However, the relationship between gender and political participation in the BS has not been corroborated in the qualitative phase of the study, in which the most politically active BPs were women (see the participants' profiles in Appendix D). Among the other three considered demographic variables, the interviews supported the results produced in the quantitative phase with regards to age, while

the relevance of education and occupation was not confirmed. Older participants therefore tended to be more politically active than younger ones not only on Facebook, but also on the Internet in general, as well as offline.

Thus there were mixed, sometimes conflicting, results with regards to the relevance of demographic variables (i.e. gender, age, education, and occupation) for Facebook political participation. Taking into consideration the quantitative results, among the considered variables gender and age appeared to be the most relevant ones in terms of Facebook political participation. However, interviews confirmed only the relevance of age, and suggested that political activity on Facebook is dependent upon pre-existing political participation and interest more than on anything else (see next section).

5.3.2 RQ 3.2 – Political engagement and political participation

RQ 3.2: How does political engagement mediate the contributions of Facebook to political participation?

Political engagement and its measures are identified in the literature as important predictors of political participation. Their links with Facebook, Internet, and offline participation were assessed through a correlation analysis.

Table 15 – Political Participation and Political Engagement: Correlations Analysis – Spearman's rho

			Facebook Political Participation	Internet Political Participation	Offline Political Participation
British Sample	Political Engagement	Correlation Coefficient	.335**	.471**	.474**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
	Political Interest	Correlation Coefficient	.465**	.580**	.557**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
	Partisanship	Correlation Coefficient	.211**	.220**	.261**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.007	.003	.002
	Political Knowledge	Correlation Coefficient	.312**	.457**	.420**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
	External Political Efficacy	Correlation Coefficient	-.126	-.118	-.007
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.079	.100	.927
	Internal Political Efficacy	Correlation Coefficient	.271**	.419**	.377**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
Italian Sample	Political Engagement	Correlation Coefficient	.566**	.502**	.604**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
	Political Interest	Correlation Coefficient	.509**	.513**	.562**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
	Partisanship	Correlation Coefficient	.447**	.394**	.454**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
	Political Knowledge	Correlation Coefficient	.289**	.311**	.375**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
	External Political Efficacy	Correlation Coefficient	.163*	.087	.147*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.023	.223	.040
	Internal Political Efficacy	Correlation Coefficient	.268**	.243**	.309**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001	.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The correlation analysis indicated that:

- In the IS political engagement had a large correlation with Facebook, Internet and offline political participation, while in the BS it was only moderately correlated to these scales.
- In the BS the correlations between political engagement and Facebook political participation were lower than the ones between political engagement and Internet and offline political participation, a pattern which seemed to apply to all the considered measures of political engagement.
- When the various measures of political engagement were taken into account, in both samples political interest was the one consistently displaying the largest correlations with the considered political participation scales.
- The main differences between the two samples emerged in relation to partisanship and external political efficacy.
- With regards to external political efficacy, in the BS this measure displayed small and negative correlations with the three considered political participation scales. However, these correlations were not statistically significant. In the IS these correlations were slightly higher (i.e., small/moderate) but positive. In both samples, among the various measures of political engagement external political efficacy was the one displaying the smallest correlations.
- With respect to partisanship, the correlations found in the IS were larger (i.e., moderate) than the ones found in the BS (i.e., small). In the BS, this measure presented small correlations with the three considered scales of participation, while in the IS was moderately correlated to these measures.

The links between political participation and political engagement were further explored in the qualitative phase. Most of the quantitative findings are supported by qualitative data. The interviews confirmed that, among the various measures of political engagement, political interest was the most strongly and consistently linked to political participation. As stressed in Sections 5.1 and 5.2, politically interested individuals were the ones who participated the most across the three considered channels.

[Relevance of political interest]:

Alex – BP: “[My limited political participation is probably linked to the fact that] I am not very interested and ... passionate about politics ... I have a little bit of passion but not enough to parley my own.”

With regards to the other components of the political engagement index, political knowledge emerged as particularly relevant to political participation, as already highlighted in Section 5.1.2 (i.e., virtuous circle). In addition, political knowledge appeared to impact positively on individuals' understanding of politics and confidence to participate politically (i.e., internal political efficacy). External political efficacy also seemed to influence participants' levels of political participation not only on Facebook but also on the Internet and offline.

[Relevance of political knowledge and internal political efficacy]:

Andrew – BP: “I started becoming interested in politics very recently. So I still feel I have a lot to learn, so you know I’m not too active just now because I still feel that I’m learning.”

Helen – BP: “I’m aware of what I post in the sense that if I’m not really informed on a subject I will not comment until I know what I’m talking about in that sense, because if everyone can see I don’t want to look like a fool.”

Ellie – BP: “I feel I don’t have enough background knowledge to be able to discuss [politics], I would just end up rambling really ... [I don’t participate politically because] I don’t have a strong opinion and I don’t feel I would be able to help out, to be honest.”

[Relevance of external political efficacy]:

Callum – BP: “When [the government] makes decisions that I disagree with, then by the time I’ve already found out about them they have already been made, I don’t think there is very much I can do about them.”

Alessandro – IP: “[I don’t participate in politics] – I don’t like it because [the government] is all talk but no action. Even with the financial crisis, they said that they were going to cut this and that, but really they should cut their own wages. [They don’t care about people’s needs], they are only there to make money.”

With respect to the last measure composing the political engagement index, namely partisanship, the qualitative data contradicted in part the quantitative data, indicating partisanship as an important factor determining the contributions of Facebook to political participation. This applies not only to IPs, as the quantitative results suggested, but also to BPs, with participants involved in party politics also particularly active on this SNS.

[Relevance of partisanship]:

Rachel – BP: “I am member of the Greens and the Greens use Facebook to some extent to communicate internally. Although most of that internal communication goes off in private mailing lists, there is a public face of communication that’s from Facebook out to the world and so I do that.”

Antonio – IP: “[I work] for Rifondazione Comunista and [I deal] with immigration related issues. Therefore, for me politics is also a job... In this sense Facebook helped me a lot [as] I write for a series of online newspapers and circulate my articles through Facebook.”

Linked to partisanship is party affiliation which refers to the alliance to a specific party. The present research adopted a bottom-up approach in examining the contributions of Facebook to political participation, focusing on citizens rather than political institutions. Given this focus, the role of political parties or movements has been investigated only to a limited extent (a more detailed discussion of this issue can be found in Section 6.7). Given the samples’ composition, with certain parties under-represented in the samples (see Appendix C) and the way party affiliation has been operationalised (see Section 6.7), it is not clear how, in the context of this study, the alliance to specific political forces can mediate the contributions of Facebook to political participation. Nonetheless, qualitative data seemed to suggest that rather than the alliance to a specific political party, it is the degree of such an affiliation that matters in terms of political participation on Facebook. Among the interviewed participants, with the exception of Hilary whose political activity on Facebook is limited due to concerns about the semi-public nature of this SNS (see Section 5.1.2), those who were active in party politics – regardless of the party – displayed the highest levels of Facebook political participation (see participants’ profiles in Appendix D). In this sense, the only notable difference emerged with regards to a participant affiliated to the M5S, a party that, as noted in Section 1.3, uses the Internet and SNSs as their key communication and mobilisation tools. This participant stressed the centrality of Facebook for the activities of the M5S, a finding which did not seem to apply to other political parties. Similarly, even if to a much lesser degree, in the BS affiliation to the political movement 38 Degrees appeared to be related to Facebook political participation.

[Relevance of affiliation to a party or movement]:

Giuliano – IP: “Four or five years ago the 5 Stars Movement started with people connecting through online platforms such as Meet Up. [At the time], Facebook was not so popular in Italy like it is today, so we started using the Meet Up platforms, then all the activity related to the discussion, the organisation of meetings and initiatives moved to Facebook.”

Alex – BP: “[Facebook] helped ... to connect people with these big massive ... programmes like this 38 Degrees, and I think that without Facebook I would have had less interaction with them.”

To recapitulate, political engagement and its measures (i.e., political interest, political knowledge, internal and external political efficacy, and partisanship) presented important links with political participation in general, and also with political participation carried out specifically through Facebook. In both samples political interest was the measure displaying the largest correlations with Facebook political participation, with qualitative data also confirming that politically interested individuals were the ones using Facebook the most for political purposes.

Partisanship also emerged as an important factor mediating the contributions of Facebook to political participation. While quantitative data indicated the relevance of this measure only for the IS, the qualitative phase suggested that a strong affiliation to a political party is positively related to the usage of Facebook for political participation for both IPs and BPs.

Likewise, political knowledge, internal and external political efficacy seemed to have a positive influence on political participation, even if to a lesser degree than political interest and partisanship. Among these three measures, political knowledge appeared to be the most relevant one.

The data did not offer a clear picture of the links between affiliation to specific political parties and political participation on Facebook. However, it seemed that, rather than the alliance to a specific political party, it is the degree of the affiliation that matters the most. The only notable exception was a participant affiliated to an Italian party, the M5S, for which Facebook is the most crucial political communication and organisational tool, and for whose supporters high levels of online political activities are typical.

5.3.3 Research Question 3.3 – Facebook activity and political participation

RQ 3.3: How do the time spent on Facebook, the relevance of this SNS in people's lives, and Facebook non-political activity mediate the contributions of this SNS to political participation?

This sub-section discusses how usage time, amount of Facebook non-political activity, relevance and perception of Facebook affects political participation, then moves on to examine the impact of different Facebook non-political usage practices. As shown in Section 4.6.1 where the questionnaire variables are explained, Facebook activity is assessed through three main measures: Facebook usage time, Facebook perceived relevance, and Facebook non-political activity.

Table 16 – Facebook Usage Time, Facebook Perceived Relevance, and Facebook Non-Political Activity: Descriptive Statistics*

	British Sample		Italian Sample	
	Median	IQR	Median	IQR
Facebook Usage Time	2	1	2	2
Facebook Perceived Relevance	14	4	13	4
Facebook Non-Political Activity	25	9	29	9

* Facebook Usage Time: 1 (Less than 1 hour), 2 (1 to 3 hours), 3 (3 to 5 hours), 4 (More than 5 hours).

Facebook Perceived Relevance: 4 (None), 8 (Low), 12 (Moderate), 16 (High), 20 (Very high).

Facebook Non-Political Activity: 9 (Never), 18 (Rarely), 27 (Sometimes), 36 (Often), 45 (Very often).

Figure 21 – Facebook Usage Time: Histograms

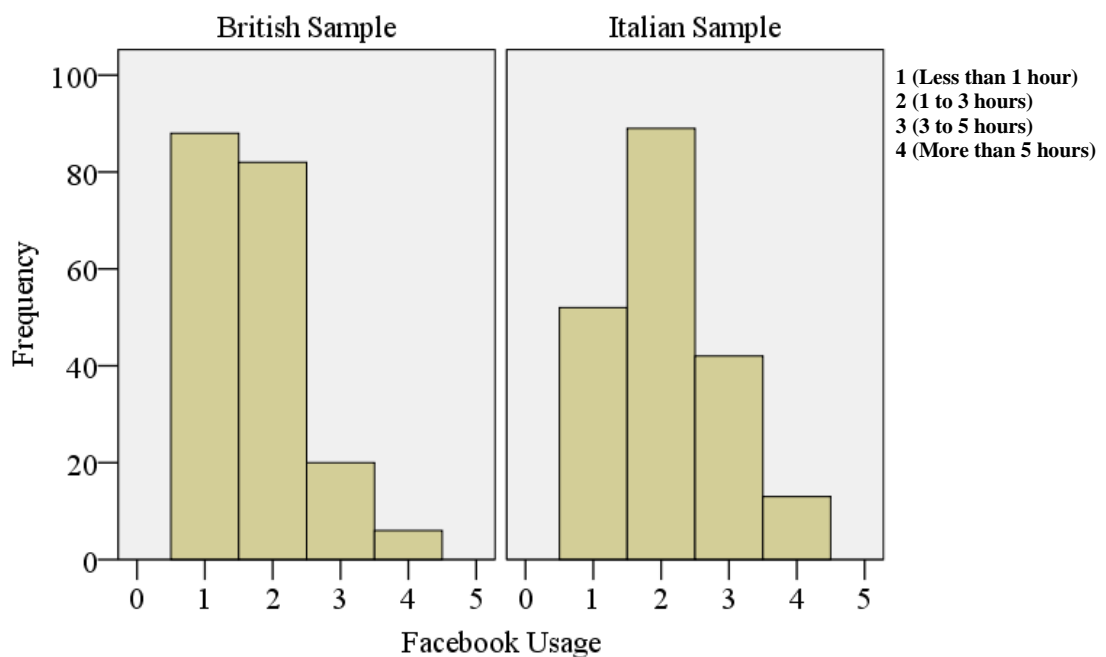


Figure 22 – Facebook Perceived Relevance: Box Plots

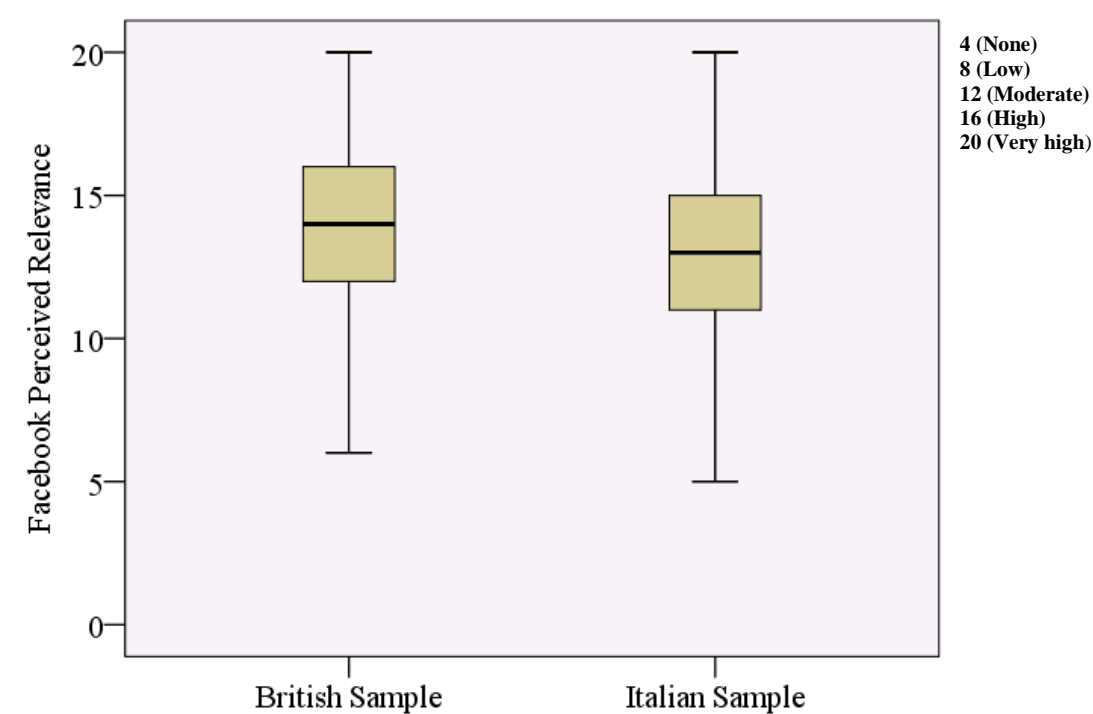
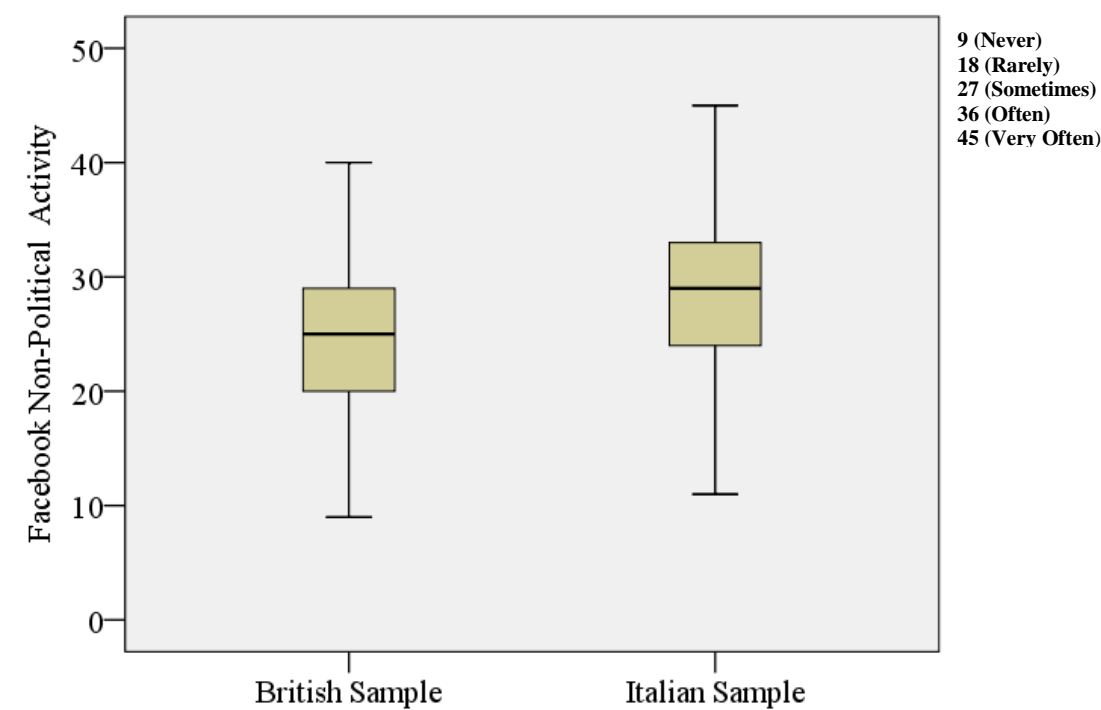


Figure 23 – Facebook Non-Political Activity: Box Plots



As Table 16, Figures 21, 22, and 23 show, unlike for Facebook political participation, the two samples scored more similarly on the other considered measures of Facebook activity:

- Both samples perceived Facebook to have a moderate or high relevance in their lives, with the BS scoring slightly higher on this measure than the IS.
- Considering the distribution of scores, IPs spent somewhat more time on Facebook than their British counterparts.
- The main difference between the two samples related to Facebook non-political activity, with IPs engaging more often than BPs in non-political activities through this SNS.

The links between these measures and Facebook Political Participation are assessed through a correlation analysis.

Table 17 – Facebook Activity: Correlation Analysis – Spearman's rho

			Facebook Political Participation
British Sample	Facebook Usage Time	Correlation Coefficient	.415**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	Facebook Perceived Relevance	Correlation Coefficient	.313**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Italian Sample	Facebook Usage Time	Correlation Coefficient	.461**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	Facebook Perceived Relevance	Correlation Coefficient	.467**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Italian Sample	Facebook Usage Time	Correlation Coefficient	.394**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	Facebook Perceived Relevance	Correlation Coefficient	.382**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

According to the correlation analysis:

- In both samples the considered measures of Facebook activity were all moderately correlated to Facebook political participation.
- In the IS Facebook usage time displayed the largest correlation with Facebook political participation, whereas in the BS the largest correlation was with Facebook non-political activity.

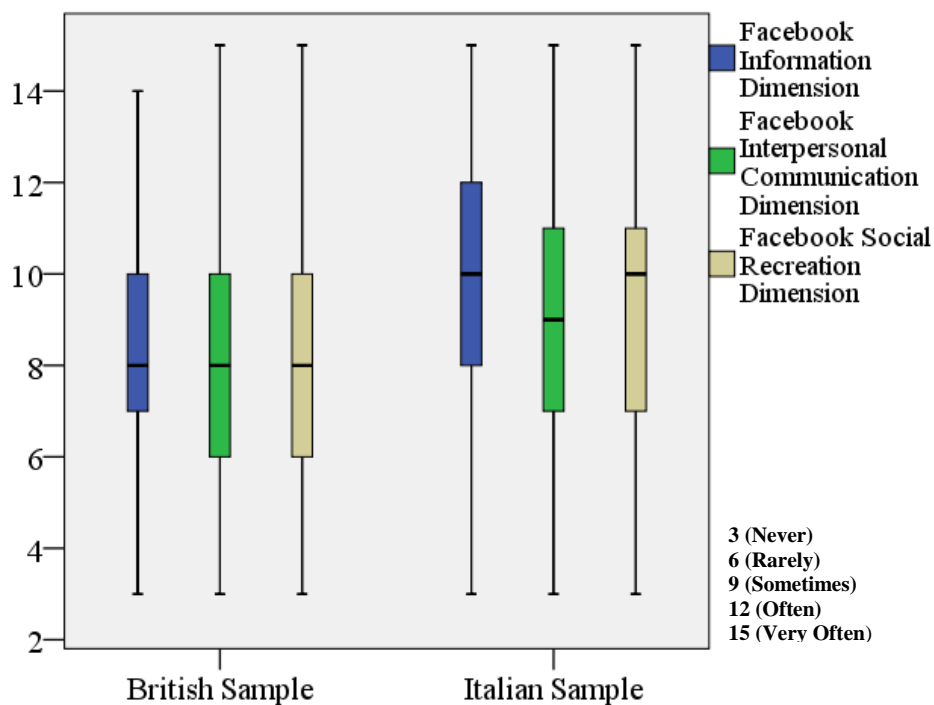
As explained in Section 4.1, a conceptual weakness of many studies investigating the impact of the Internet on political participation is the over-generalisation of Internet usage. To address such a gap, the present research examined whether the contributions of Facebook to political participation vary according to the different non-political usages of this SNS. In order to do so, the Facebook non-political activity scale was split into three different usage dimensions, and the relationships between these dimensions and Facebook political participation were assessed through a correlation analysis.

Table 18 – Facebook Non-Political Usages: Descriptive Statistics*

	British Sample		Italian Sample	
	Median	IQR	Median	IQR
Facebook Information	8	3	10	4
Facebook Interpersonal Communication	8	4	9	4
Facebook Social Recreation	8	4	10	4

* 3 (Never), 6 (Rarely), 9 (Sometimes), 12 (Often), 15 (Very Often).

Figure 24 – Facebook Non-Political Usage Dimensions: Box Plots



When the three considered Facebook usages are taken into account, it emerges that:

- In the two samples, the differences between the three non-political usage dimensions are minimal.
- Like for the other measures of Facebook activity IPs score higher than BPs in all considered usage dimensions.

Table 19 – Facebook Political Participation and Facebook Non-Political Usages: Correlation Analysis – Spearman's rho

			Facebook Political Participation
British Sample	Facebook Information	Correlation Coefficient	.402**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	Facebook Interpersonal Communication	Correlation Coefficient	.443**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	Facebook Social Recreation	Correlation Coefficient	.395**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Italian Sample	Facebook Information	Correlation Coefficient	.374**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	Facebook Interpersonal Communication	Correlation Coefficient	.378**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	Facebook Social Recreation	Correlation Coefficient	.291**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation analysis indicated that:

- The two samples displayed similar correlations between the considered Facebook non-political usages and Facebook political participation (i.e., small/moderate).
- In both samples, the social recreation dimension displayed smaller correlations with Facebook political participation in comparison to the other two usage dimensions.

Quantitative data established, therefore, that Facebook usage time, Facebook perceived relevance, and Facebook non-political activity are all somewhat related to Facebook political participation. The links between these measures were further explored in the qualitative phase.

With regards to the relevance of Facebook in people's lives, the surveys showed that Facebook was perceived by both samples as highly relevant to them. With some exceptions – as Lesley's quote below exemplifies – this finding was confirmed in the interviews.

[Importance of Facebook in people's lives]:

Francesca – IP: “Facebook is the first page I open when I access the Internet [and it] has become my main tool to keep in touch with friends.”

Carmela – IP: “I could never think of closing my Facebook account, if only for all the connections that I have built at the professional level.”

[Negative perception of Facebook]:

Lesley – BP: “[Facebook] can draw you in and become a big time-waster and this is something I cannot afford to do ... as a self-employed person. [Twitter] is very quick and less of a time-waster than Facebook.”

Even if BPs scored higher than IPs on the Facebook perceived relevance scale, the qualitative data indicated that the importance of Facebook in participants' lives was higher in the IS. For IPs, Facebook was the most commonly used Internet tool for both political and non-political activities (see Section 5.1.1 for the results related to the relevance of Facebook as a political platform). IPs observed that Facebook has replaced many other online platforms, with Internet activity becoming almost entirely Facebook activity in certain cases, a trend less likely to be found among BPs and that could, in part, explain IPs' higher levels of political participation on Facebook.

[Facebook replacing other Internet tools]:

Rachel – BP: “Facebook ... replaced things I used to do. In the days before Facebook there were a few closed forums ... and private discussion lists and I used to be very active in those.”

Luigi – IP: “Facebook is the only social network I participate in. I don't even have a profile on Twitter ... it is not because I like it, [but] I found myself on it and I don't want to have profiles [on other websites as] it would become too distracting.”

Alessandro – IP: “Most of the times I use Facebook because it is the only social network which allows you to see so many things together – from politics to sport and everyday stuff.”

In relation to the various non-political usages of Facebook, it was not clear from the quantitative data whether there was a specific non-political use which was preferable to others. These results were confirmed in the interviews which indicated that Facebook was

used as an all-encompassing platform, a tool to engage in a wide range of activities rather than being employed for one particular goal. BPs and IPs often used this SNS to keep in touch with friends, to obtain information, for entertainment purposes (e.g., organising a night out or playing games), for work, for studying and even for dating purposes. These usages varied from user to user.

[Facebook as an all-encompassing platform]:

Lesley – BP: “I use [Facebook mainly] for social communication. I use it for communicating events that I’m running, for example workshops and courses that I’m running, occasionally for commenting on somebody’s photograph or maybe put a link to something interesting.”

Hilary – BP: “Basically [I use Facebook] just to be in touch with friends – I’ve got friends in all parts of the world and that’s mainly why; [I use it] just to keep in touch with all of them. I like to use it for light-hearted chat and I like to see if someone puts an event, ok I’m attending that event – that’s what I really like to use it for.”

Hazel – BP: “On Facebook, other than political activities, I play games and I do chat to friends sometimes, keep up to date as to what friends are doing and family as well.”

Alastair – BP: “[Facebook is used] to keep in touch with friends, communicate with friends, organising parties and things ... I mainly use it just to kill time, just if I’ve got nothing to do, I go on Facebook.”

Helen – BP: “[I use Facebook] for chatting, reading news, reading pages ... I would say fifty-fifty for information and entertainment.”

Ciro – IP: “Very often [I use Facebook] to share information, thoughts, moods, images. I use it as a way to promote certain activities I organise or simply in a more light-hearted and informative way.”

Carmela – IP: “During the day I often check my Facebook page, and as I follow several newspapers I am constantly informed ... I don’t lose anything. So you can use this tool for informative purposes rather than for entertainment. Actually sometimes I have read something first on Facebook, and only after on newspapers websites”

Francesca – IP: “Basically I use Facebook to communicate with people, and also to share non-political and political information.”

Rosaria – IP: “I use Facebook for work and for silly things.”

Giuliano – IP: “I use it for my company that deals with online sales ... I have created a Facebook page because it gives you more opportunities to interact with people ... I have reached 4000 contacts and I publish offers, I post pictures, I publish any relevant news there. [Also I use it] to keep in touch with friends and family.”

Gaia – IP: “On Facebook I contact and keep in touch with friends. Then I post music, lose time, read the news ... and I even use it for university.”

The correlation analysis did not clarify the ways in which different non-political usages of Facebook relate to political participation on this SNS. Among the considered usage dimensions, the social recreation dimension displayed the smallest correlations with Facebook political participation. However, the differences between this and the other dimensions were minor. The interviews shed light on this issue and indicated that the various dimensions did not impact differently on political participation on this SNS. For instance, Hazel, one of the most politically active participants, used Facebook also for entertainment, while Gaia, despite employing Facebook for information purposes, exhibited limited levels of political activity on this SNS. It thus appeared that rather than the non-political ways people used Facebook, it was the general level of Facebook activity that mattered in terms of political participation. The correlation analysis shown in Table 17 highlighted the moderate correlations between Facebook political participation, Facebook usage time, and Facebook non-political activity. These links appeared even stronger when the interviews were also considered. The qualitative data, in fact, illustrated that the more time people spent on Facebook and engaged in on-site activities, the more likely they were to participate politically. In fact, simply by being on Facebook users can be exposed, often accidentally, to political information through the News Feed, and learn more about politics that way (see Section 5.1.2).

[Relevance of the amount of Facebook usage]:

Helen – BP: “The amount of usage, the pages that you like [affect your political participation on Facebook], because the more time you spend on it the more things you discover, you start liking more and more pages, and those pages post links...”

Francesca – IP: “I must admit that Facebook is the first page that I open when I access the Internet. [For this reason most of the political information that I get] comes from Facebook ... Even if I didn’t want to get this information I would get it anyway, because

by being on Facebook information comes from friends' status updates to pages that I follow."

Ciro – IP: "If you spend a number of hours on Facebook you will come cross hundreds of links, and some of these could be political ones and get your attention. On a daily basis, I am not really active, in the sense that I don't look for stuff, but I can read, for instance, twenty articles that I get through the News Feed."

In summary, both samples, and in particular IPs, perceived Facebook as a platform highly relevant to them. While BPs tended to use Facebook in conjunction with other online platforms such as Twitter, for IPs Facebook was the most commonly used Internet tool for both political (see Section 5.1.1) and non-political activities, a finding which could explain IPs' higher levels of political participation on Facebook.

The non-political usages of Facebook varied from user to user, with the platform used for a wide array of activities ranging from communication and entertainment to information and work related activities. However, it appeared that, rather than the ways people use this SNS, it is the time spent on Facebook and the levels of participation in non-political activities that contribute the most to political participation. In this sense, interviews showed that the News Feed plays a central role by assuming a broadcasting function and disseminating political and non-political information to which users are often exposed accidentally.

5.4 Summary of Findings

RQ 1: How does Facebook contribute to British and Italian citizens' political participation?

- RQ 1.1: Is Facebook a relevant venue for political participation and what are the links between Facebook, Internet and offline political participation?
 - In both samples the non-political usage of Facebook overcame the political usage, suggesting that this SNS is mostly used for non-political purposes.
 - The two samples displayed limited levels of participation across the three considered channels (i.e., Facebook, the Internet, and offline). The differences between the two samples were minimal, but IPs exhibited higher scores, particularly with regards to Facebook political participation.
 - BPs often employed other online platforms in conjunction with or instead of Facebook for participating politically, whereas in the IS Facebook was by far the most relevant online political platform.
 - The relevance of Facebook as a political platform was much higher for individuals displaying high levels of political participation.
 - Facebook can operate as an activator of the political participation process and also promote the involvement of citizens who have limited levels of political participation because they lack motivation, are restrained by health-related issues, or simply are not aware of participation opportunities. In relation to the latter scenario (i.e., lack of information), political participation can begin on this SNS and then flow into other channels.
- RQ 1.2: What are the advantages and limitations of Facebook in terms of political participation?
 - According to the interviews, the greatest political affordance of Facebook is a practical one. This SNS can reduce the thresholds of participation, making political participation more flexible and less expensive in terms of resources, e.g., time.
 - The second main advantage of Facebook in terms of political participation is its informative power. By exposing users to political information, it can trigger a virtuous circle, increasing political interest and knowledge, eventually leading to political participation.
 - A limitation of Facebook as a political platform is the fact that this SNS is not a universal tool. Facebook reaches a relatively small part of the British

and Italian populations, and requires digital skills that not every citizen holds.

- The semi-public nature of Facebook and the associated privacy concerns can have a restraining effect on users' political participation. Privacy in the Facebook environment appeared to be a bigger issue for BPs, with the presence of certain contacts and of identity attributes often inhibiting their political activity.

RQ 2: Do the contributions of Facebook to political participation vary depending on the political activity in question??

- RQ 2.1: Distinguishing between political communication and political mobilisation, how do the contributions of Facebook vary in relation to these two different typologies of political activity?
 - As the general measures of political participation indicated, the same was found with regards to political communication and mobilisation: IPs were slightly more active than BPs, particularly on Facebook.
 - Both samples tended to engage more often in political communication activities than mobilisation ones – moderate vs limited or no participation –, a trend confirmed in all three considered participation channels.
 - The samples' higher participation in political communication activities can be attributed to two causes. The first is that these activities are less resource-expensive than the ones falling within the mobilisation dimension (e.g., less demanding in terms of time). The second is the scepticism shown by BPs and IPs towards political initiatives. Participants, in particular IPs, often queried the efficacy of political initiatives, expressing disenchantment towards the political establishment and doubting its responsiveness to citizens' actions.
 - Given the costs and perception of the efficacy of mobilisation activities, the contributions of Facebook to the mobilisation dimension remained limited to participants who were already politically active, with less politically active participants tending to employ Facebook mainly as a communicative and informative political tool.
 - Facebook emerged as a key tool in activists' political repertoires, often replacing other online platforms and offline methods which had previously

been employed for communicating, organising and promoting political initiatives.

- RQ 2.2: How does Facebook contribute to British and Italian citizens' consumption of political information?
 - The trends which emerged in relation to the other considered measures of political participation were confirmed also with regards to the consumption of political information, with IPs slightly more active than BPs, particularly on Facebook – moderate vs limited participation..
 - Participants remarked that Facebook can contribute to the diffusion of political information by operating as an information catalyst. Interviews suggested that the informative power of this SNS rests on the proliferation of information sources, the networked and sometimes viral character of Facebook information, and its capability to trigger the information search process.
 - The main limitation of Facebook in terms of political information is linked to the credibility of the political information circulating on this SNS, with participants highlighting the abundance of bogus information.
 - Users acknowledged that they were exposed to politically diverse information through Facebook, by directly selecting this information or, more commonly, by being accidentally exposed to it.
 - Both samples confirmed the presence on Facebook of information from popular media broadcasters and information from alternative sources (e.g., blogs, Facebook pages). BPs consumed mainly political information from established sources. The same applied to IPs who, however, seemed to value alternative sources more than their British counterparts.
 - The greater value that IPs attributed to alternative sources is most likely linked to their perception of mainstream media. IPs were more sceptical than BPs of mainstream media, particularly of TV which was their least used medium. They questioned the independence of mainstream media from the political establishment, and often depicted Facebook, and the Internet more generally, as realms immune to the corrupting influence of politics.

- RQ 2.3: How does Facebook contribute to British and Italian citizens' political discussion?
 - Like for all other measures of political participation, IPs participated slightly more than BPs in political discussions – moderate vs limited participation. The difference with the other measures is that for both BPs and IPs the Internet was the least used venue for political discussion, while Facebook and the offline world were equivalent in terms of scores.
 - Facebook seemed to contribute to political discussion by operating as an additional discussion venue for individuals who were already interested in politics.
 - Facebook often replaced other online platforms, in particular in the IS, but did not become a substitute for offline discussion.
 - Facebook can promote political discussion by making it more flexible and expanding and diversifying the discussion networks.
 - Because of the expansion and diversification of the discussion networks, participants were exposed on Facebook to more political difference than they experienced offline and on other Internet platforms.
 - Both BPs and IPs tended to prefer offline discussion to computer-mediated discussion. Participants stressed the importance of the physical elements of offline discussion, e.g., body language. They noted the more confrontational nature of online discussion and how the absence of visual and acoustic cues can often lead to misunderstandings and to harsher and more aggressive exchanges. However, the physical absence in online conversation was not unanimously considered detrimental, with some participants arguing that it can encourage honesty and foster participation.

RQ 3: What are the factors mediating the contributions of Facebook to British and Italian citizens' political participation?

- RQ 3.1: How do demographic factors such as gender, age, education and occupation intervene in the links between Facebook and political participation?
 - Quantitative and qualitative data produced contrasting pictures with regard to the links between demographic variables (i.e., gender, age, education, and occupation) and political participation on Facebook. According to the quantitative results, among the considered variables, gender and age appeared to be the most relevant ones, with females in the BS and younger

people in the IS less politically active than males in the BS and older people in the IS. However, interviews confirmed only the relevance of age – in both samples – and suggested that political activity on Facebook is related to pre-existing political participation and interest more than to anything else.

- RQ 3.2: How does political engagement mediate the contributions of Facebook to political participation?
 - Political engagement and its measures (i.e., political interest, political knowledge, internal and external political efficacy, and partisanship) demonstrated important links with political participation in general and, consequently, also with political participation carried out through Facebook.
 - In both samples political interest was the measure displaying the largest correlations with Facebook political participation. Qualitative data also confirmed that politically interested individuals tend to be the ones who employ Facebook the most for political purposes.
 - Political knowledge, internal and external political efficacy appeared also to mediate the contributions of Facebook to political participation. Among these three measures, interviews indicated political knowledge as the most relevant one (i.e., virtuous circle).
 - Partisanship also emerged as highly relevant to political participation on Facebook. While quantitative data suggested that this measure was more relevant to the IS, the qualitative data indicated that a strong affiliation to a political party strongly affected the usage of Facebook for political participation, for both IPs and BPs.
 - The data did not offer a clear picture on how the affiliation to specific political parties can impact on political participation on Facebook. It seemed that, rather than the alliance to a specific political party, it is the degree of such an affiliation that matters the most. The only notable exception was found in relation to an Italian participant affiliated to the M5S, a party whose members employ Facebook to a great extent for communication and organisation purposes.

- RQ 3.3: How do the time spent on Facebook, the relevance of this SNS in people's lives, Facebook non-political activity and different non-political usage practices (information vs communication vs social recreation) mediate the contributions of this SNS to political participation?
 - Both samples perceived Facebook as highly relevant to them. While BPs often used Facebook in conjunction with other online platforms such as Twitter, for IPs Facebook was the dominant Internet tool for both political and non-political activities. This finding could explain, in part, IPs' higher levels of political participation on Facebook
 - The non-political usages of Facebook varied greatly from user to user. Facebook appeared to be an all-encompassing platform allowing participants to engage in a wide array of activities, ranging from communication and entertainment to information and work related activities.
 - Rather than the ways people used this SNS, it seemed that it was the time spent on it in general, and the levels of participation in non-political activities, that contributed the most to political participation. By simply being on Facebook users can be exposed, often accidentally, to political information through the News Feed. This accidental absorption of political information can eventually lead to participation in other political activities.

6 DISCUSSION

This research examines the contributions of Facebook to citizens' political participation in Italy and the United Kingdom. It is an exploratory study which aims to add to the existing academic debates on the links between digital technologies and political participation, and to indicate new avenues for the development of this strand of research.

This chapter is organised in seven main sections and offers a discussion of the findings produced in the quantitative and qualitative phases of the present investigation. The first two sections highlight the value of adopting a cross-national comparative approach and identify contextual factors which impact upon the relationship between Facebook and political participation. The first section examines the ways in which different media and political landscapes can influence citizens' media habits and affect the contributions of digital technologies to political participation. The second section focuses on the ways in which privacy concerns and self-presentation on Facebook affect political activities carried out on this online platform, and how the influence of these concerns varies in the two considered samples.

While the first two sections discuss how political participation on Facebook can be affected by factors typical of the British and Italian contexts, the next sections work towards devising a general theory of Facebook political participation. The third section deals with the alleged tendency of digital media (see Sections 3.2 and 3.3) to promote political fragmentation and polarisation, and makes the argument that Facebook can potentially counteract such trends. The fourth section explores the process of political participation in the Facebook environment and the capacity that this SNS has to promote what can be described as *information-led mobilisation*. The fifth section draws attention to the limits of Facebook as a political platform and to its links with the offline world, and asserts that in such a setting new and old media logics and practices blend and compete. Taking into consideration the previous sections and chapters, an explanatory model focusing specifically on Facebook political participation is developed in the sixth section. Finally, in the seventh section the limitations of the present research are discussed and fruitful avenues for further research indicated.

6.1 Contextual Factors and Political Participation: Media and Political Landscapes in Italy and the UK

In this and the next section the differences between the BS and IS in terms of political participation are considered, revealing the value of adopting a comparative cross-national approach. The previous chapter showed that IPs were more politically active than BPs on Facebook, particularly with regards to the consumption of political information. The same applies to the Internet and the offline world, but in these two channels the differences between the samples were less marked. This section considers how such a participatory gap could be in part ascribed to contextual factors specific to Italy and the UK. In *Digital Media and Political Engagement Worldwide*, Anduiza et al. (2012) stress that “online practices do not exist in a vacuum but are related and linked to institutional contexts, levels of technological development, and extant political practices and orientations” (p. 245). Anduiza et al. (2012) identify three contextual variables expected to mediate the relationship between digital media and political participation: the digital divide, the media system, and the institutional setting. The present research reaches a similar conclusion independently of the above work and attests to the relevance of such variables also for Facebook political participation. The thematic analysis of the interviews indicated in fact that the media landscapes of Italy and UK, and the diverse political settings of these two countries, could explain to a certain extent the participatory gap between the samples.

With respect to the media scenarios, results clearly showed that Facebook was the most commonly used online political platform in the IS. In contrast, BPs’ online political activity was more fragmented, with other platforms such as Twitter used in conjunction or instead of Facebook (see Section 5.1.1). These usage patterns are confirmed by data on the penetration of Twitter in the British and Italian online populations. As shown in a 2013 study of PeerReach, an Amsterdam based social media start-up that provides influence metrics, Twitter has a much higher penetration in the UK (12% of all Internet users) than it has in Italy (5% of all Internet users). These figures are supported by Cremonesi et al.’s (2014) recent study which, comparing Facebook and Twitter, finds that far fewer Italians use Twitter for political purposes.

Another factor worth considering which relates to the media landscapes of Italy and the UK is the impact that a participant’s perception of traditional media, particularly of TV, could have on her/his political usage of Facebook. Results indicated that IPs were much more critical of traditional media than BPs due to the ties these media have with the political

establishment (see Section 5.2.2). As indicated by the data, this negative perception pushed some IPs to seek out alternative political information sources, including Facebook. In support of this argument, several studies establish that alternative media usage is driven by pre-existing political attitudes and negative perceptions of mainstream news organisations (Christie 2009; Leung and Lee 2014). These studies also indicate that SNSs such as Facebook are often employed as alternative information sources, enabling users to bypass mainstream media (Leung and Lee 2014; Vicari 2013; Vromen et al. 2015).

It could be argued that the two samples' different perceptions of traditional media are shaped by the different media systems of Italy and the UK. In their influential book, *Comparing Media Systems*, Hallin and Mancini (2004) differentiate between the Mediterranean or Polarised Pluralist model, the North-Central European or Democratic Corporatist model, and the North Atlantic or Liberal model (see *Political Communication Cultures in Europe*, edited by Pfetsch – 2014 – and particularly Hardy's – 2008 – *Western Media Systems*, for critiques of this categorisation). The British media system falls within the latter model which is characterised by the professionalisation of journalism, a "fact-centred" reporting style and an institutionalised separation between media and political parties. Nonetheless, it is still impossible to completely separate the British media from the political establishment, as the British press is dominated by political parallelism. In contrast, according to Hallin and Mancini (2004), the national public broadcaster, the BBC, combines relative political independence with responsiveness to public taste and a public service orientation.

The Polarised Pluralist model is typical of Southern European countries such as Italy and is characterised by close ties between media and the world of politics. In the Mediterranean model, media tend to represent the wide range of political forces fighting to make their voices heard, rather than operating as *watchdogs* of the political establishment. The close relationship between media and political parties in Mediterranean European countries has contributed to the development of a pluralistic media system, in which media outlets often operate as collaborators with the political power (Hallin and Mancini 2004). In the case of Italy, TV – the medium that IPs criticised the most – is arguably less pluralist than other media. This is due to an Italian anomaly, namely Berlusconi's ownership of the Mediaset group, a situation which makes Italy a unique case in Europe. Berlusconi is both leader of the centre-right coalition and owner of Mediaset, the main private Italian television broadcaster. In addition, given his leadership of the Forza Italia party, he also influences the public broadcaster RAI (the institutional structure of RAI – the governing board is formed by five members, three representative of the majority and two of the opposition – is to blame for

this inconvenience). The highly politicised nature of Italian media is confirmed in numerous investigations (Agostini 2012; Ciaglia 2013; de Frutos García 2014; Hanretty 2007, 2010; Reporters Without Borders 2003; Spada 2012). Among these, the study by Ciaglia (2013) is particularly interesting in the context of the present thesis as it compares the links between media and political systems, focusing on the cases of the BBC and RAI. Ciaglia (2013) observes that the British government has an important role in electing members of the Trust governing the BBC. However, while in Britain there is a process in place to verify the professional qualifications of the elected trustees, in Italy the board of directors of RAI is elected purely on parliamentary basis (as explained above, the five members of the board are comprised of three majority representatives, and two from the opposition) and reflects the power balance of the parties in the Italian Parliament.

Being so strongly influenced by political forces, it would be possible to contend that Italian traditional media fall short in their key role, namely providing citizens with information of national relevance in order to enable them to effectively participate in the democratic process. The limited capacity of the media – in particular of the public broadcaster – to adequately inform the Italian public, which would also explain why IPs valued alternative stories circulating on Facebook more than BPs, is backed up by a recent cross-national study comparing the influence of public and private broadcasters on knowledge of public affairs across Britain, Canada, Norway, Italy, Japan and South Korea (Soroka et al. 2013). Soroka et al. (2013) find that in the UK people who watch BBC news are more informed about public affairs than those who regularly consume news on the leading commercial channel, ITV. In contrast, the knowledge gap in Italy between consumers of public and private news is minimal. Soroka et al. (2013) hold the view that this could be related to the British and Italian media systems and argue that “the institutional framework of the public broadcaster influences its mandate to inform and enlighten” (p. 735). Taking into account the levels of institutional independence the public broadcaster has from the political process (i.e., *de jure independence*), they reason that “autonomy from everyday politics should serve to enhance journalistic objectivity and generally to enable editors and journalists alike to pursue and report stories in the manner most consistent with the goals of public broadcasting” (p. 735). As also explained by Hallin and Mancini (2004), while the BBC has a high degree of *de jure independence*, RAI is one of the least independent public broadcasters in the countries considered in Soroka et al.’s (2013) investigation. Considering these findings, it can be reasoned that by failing in their informative role, Italian TV broadcasters (the RAI for the reasons presented above, and the Mediaset channels for obvious ownership-related issues)

have encouraged Italian citizens to migrate online in order to obtain less biased political information.

The results from the present study therefore suggest that media systems exert a certain influence on a population's political engagement through Facebook and other online platforms, whether for issues of government control over the media, lack of trust in media institutions, or issues related to media ownership. In support of these findings, Cantijoch (2012) argues that in a country such as Spain, with a similar media system to Italy (de Frutos García 2014; Hallin and Mancini 2004), where the public broadcaster is the main source of news and the other channels are limited by a public charter, online sources are crucial information channels for causes challenging the dominant political establishment. Hussain and Howard (2012) show that in Egypt and Pakistan, two countries with strong governmental control over the media and low trust in broadcast media, there has been a rise in online citizens' journalism. Similarly, Davis et al. (2009) predict that the political use of digital technologies will be greater in countries with relatively fragmented and less trusted media systems. This is amplified in the case of Italy, where, due to the *Berlusconi anomaly*, part of the Italian population has migrated to online platforms such as Facebook to obtain alternative information. This shift is demonstrated by several studies which find that individuals opposing Berlusconi's political coalition are more inclined to rely on online political information and to participate politically through the Internet (Itanes 2008; Vaccari 2006, 2012).

Having considered the potential influence of the media systems of Italy and the UK, it is also possible that the different political scenarios of the two countries contributed to the participatory gap between the samples of this study. In recent years the relevance of online platforms, particularly of Facebook, as alternative venues for political participation has further increased in Italy, due to the emergence of a new political force, the M5S. Campante et al. (2013) confirm that the effects of the Internet on citizens' political participation can change due to the activity of an online grassroots protest movement, as the M5S was in its early form, which takes advantage of digital technologies to engage disenchanted and demobilised citizens. The M5S developed initially as an online protest movement which took advantage of Italians' disenchantment towards the existing political class and became a potent national political force (see Section 1.3). The Internet is the M5S's major organisational and communication tool (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013), with the blog *beppegrillo.it* operating as their main house organ (Tipaldo and Pisciotto 2014).

Supporters of this party typically demonstrate high levels of online activity – a trait confirmed in the case of Giuliano, an activist involved with the M5S (see Section 5.3.2) – and utilise the Internet and Facebook for information and participatory activities more than citizens with left-wing orientations, and much more than individuals affiliated to right-wing political parties (Cremonesi et al. 2014). Another common characteristic of the *grillini* (this is how the supporters of the M5S are described by Italian media, referencing the leader of the movement, Beppe Grillo) is their detachment from and even hostility towards the current Italian political class and institutions (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013; Campante et al. 2013; Roncaralo 2014).

The anti-establishment stance of the M5S has been central to the movement's communication strategy; their continuous attacks on professional politicians and established parties appealed to Italians' sense of political disenchantment, attracting a lot of support among voters. This pronouncement of political disenchantment among Italian citizens was confirmed in the present research – IPs were more critical of their political class than BPs were of theirs (see Section 5.2.1) – and is supported by several authors (Almond and Verba 1963; Curran et al. 2014; Donovan and Onofri 2008; Roncaralo 2014; Sani 1989). Donovan and Onofri (2008) stress that the main trait of Italian political culture today remains to be the chronic and long term dissatisfaction with the political system. Similarly, in a recent study based on a content analysis of television news and survey in 11 nations, including Italy and the UK, Curran et al. (2014) show that there is a widespread political disenchantment across the world, with Italy and Japan identified as the two countries in which the highest percentage of people believe that voting makes little or no difference.

Considering Italians' political disenchantment, Campante et al. (2013) employ the notions of *voice* and *exit* developed by Hirschman (1970) to analyse the success of the M5S and their usage of digital technologies. According to their analysis, citizens particularly dissatisfied with mainstream Italian politics have used the Internet as an exit option to express their political views, and have voiced their displeasure by casting protest votes. They reason that the M5S embodies the potential of digital technologies to transition from exit devices into novel sources of voice within mainstream politics (Campante et al. 2013). Focusing on Facebook, Barisione et al. (2014) support this consideration and establish that in Italy people using Facebook as a political information source are particularly critical of all political leaders, while regular viewers of entertainment TV programs display more pro-Berlusconi attitudes. These findings support the idea that the Internet plays a central role in supporting the activities of alternative and oppositional forces (Papacharissi 2009) by altering the

balance of resources among the various political actors and reducing the costs of information and communication so to benefit minor parties, fringe movements and smaller groups (Bimber 2003; Norris 2001; van de Donk et al. 2004). In this sense it is possible to talk of *equalisation*. Such a notion refers to the opportunity, offered by digital technologies, for outsider and oppositional organisations to compete on level ground with mainstream political institutions (Davis et al. 2009). A prime example of equalisation arises out of two relatively recent events in Italy, the V-Day of 2007 and the No B-Day of 2009: two political protests against Berlusconi and his coalition which were organised entirely through online methods, exemplifying how use of the Internet can overturn the asymmetry in visibility between established and oppositional political forces (Vergani 2011). The V-Day and B-Day are emblems of online political participation in Italy, effectively marking the dawn of the M5S.

While in Italy a citizen's political affiliation clearly determines her/his preference of media channel(s) (Barisone et al. 2014), it is not possible to identify such an obvious pattern in the UK. Focusing on the 2010 British general elections, Gibson et al. (2010) show that Liberal Democrat, Green, and UKIP supporters are more politically active online than Labour and Conservative supporters, who display very similar levels of involvement to one another. However, these discrepancies among supporters of various British parties are not as marked as in the Italian case. This is less true for the specific case of Scotland: in the context of the 2011 election, the SNP and its candidates had the greatest online presence and the largest following (Baxter and Marcella, 2013), a trend confirmed in the recent Scottish Independence Referendum. Unfortunately, due to the way party affiliation was operationalised in the present research, and because no SNP supporters took part in the interviews, the links between the affiliation to this party and Facebook political participation were not examined in this thesis (see Section 6.7 for a discussion of this issue). On the basis of the findings from the present research, it could be argued that, unlike in Italy, the political disenchantment in Britain – the presence of which became evident in this thesis (see Section 5.2.1) and in several other investigations (Donovan and Onofri 2008; Hansard Society 2013, 2014; Whiteley 2012) – found no outlet in the form of an oppositional political force able to compete with more established parties by exploiting the affordances of the Internet. In the British political scenario, the 38 Degrees movement is the political entity most similar to the M5S and, as shown in the case of Alex, connection with this movement can promote Facebook political participation (see Sections 5.1.1 and 5.3.2). However, despite its success (as reported by Chadwick – 2013 – in 2012 it had a membership of over 1 million), 38

Degrees' activist base and its impact on the political process cannot be compared to those of the M5S. The absence of a political force capable of appealing to the widespread political disenchantment, combined with the lower levels of political parallelism in British TV, could explain why affiliation to a certain political party in the UK does not affect levels of political usage of digital technologies as strongly as in Italy.

Drawing on the results of the present research and the findings of several academic studies, this section has highlighted the presence of three contextual factors mediating the contributions of Facebook to political participation and accounting, in part, for IPs' higher levels of political participation through this SNS. The first factor is the different levels of usage and relevance of various online platforms in these two countries. Facebook is by far the dominant SNS in Italy, while in the UK other platforms such as Twitter are used in combination with or even as replacements for Facebook. The second contextual variable is the differences in the media systems of the two countries, the Italian system demonstrating higher levels of political parallelism and what can be defined as the Berlusconi anomaly. These two elements have led part of the Italian electorate to develop a negative perception of mainstream media and to migrate to online platforms such as Facebook in order to obtain alternative political information. Finally, the third contextual factor is the presence of a political party such as the M5S whose supporters are particularly active online and which embodies the political disenchantment towards the political class and establishment, making full use of the communicative and organisational affordances of online platforms such as Facebook. After careful consideration it is possible to claim that due to these three contextual factors Italian Facebook users are more likely than their British counterparts to participate politically through this SNS.

6.2 Facebook as Political Front Stage: Privacy, Self-Presentation and Political Participation

The previous section argued that the variation in levels of Facebook political participation between samples could be attributed to differences in the media and political scenarios of Italy and the UK. Interviews, however, suggested an additional explanation for this participatory gap. From the qualitative data it appeared that the privacy concerns of Facebook users and the semi-public setting of the site have a varying impact on Facebook political participation across the two samples. The presence of Facebook friends with contrasting political views to the user in question was a bigger issue for BPs, with network

heterogeneity having a stronger restraining effect on British users' political participation than it did for IPs (see Section 5.1.2).

To understand the links between political participation, privacy, and the semi-public nature of the Facebook environment, it is necessary to consider the purpose and orientation of political participation on SNSs. As explained in Section 2.1.1, one of the most influential and widely used theorisations of political participation is the one developed by Verba et al. (1995). According to such a theorisation, which has been adopted in many studies investigating the impact of the Internet on political participation (e.g., Calenda and Meijer 2009; Dimitrova et al. 2014; Dutta-Bergman and Chung 2005), political participation aims to affect governments' actions and, consequently, is a government-oriented activity. However, considering the changes in citizens' participatory repertoires (i.e., Norris' – 2002 – *democratic phoenix*) and the rise of *lifestyle politics* (Bennett 1998) highlighted in Section 1.2, Verba et al.'s (1995) conceptualisation appears too narrow in that it excludes more personalised and communicative forms of political participation (e.g., consumption of political information, political talk, and political consumerism) which assume a central relevance in online platforms such as SNSs.

SNSs, particularly Facebook, appear in fact to be well suited to this latter type of participation, precisely because they are tools for self-affirmation (Toma and Hancock 2013), providing individuals with a stage for crafting a self-image and promoting such an image beyond intimate circles (van Dijck 2013). Consistent with research on online dating (Ellison et al. 2006), Zhao et al. (2008) argue that Facebook-built identities are usually neither manifestations of the true selves commonly seen in anonymous online environments, or of the real selves shown face-to-face. Rather they are expressions of *hoped-for possible selves* which are essentially highly socially desirable identities which individuals aspire to have (Zhao et al. 2008).

Political acts on this SNS (e.g., liking a page or a link, joining a group, updating a status, etc.) are not necessarily intended to affect government actions or influence other individuals' behaviours, but could rather be interpreted as identity statements. Such a conception is shared by several authors (Gustafsson et al. 2008; Macafee 2013; Marichal 2013; Sanford and Rose 2007; Ward and de Vreese 2011). For instance, in his research on Facebook political groups, Marichal (2013) suggests that Facebook political activity should be interpreted more as a discursive performance designed to express an idealised political identity, and less as an action or series of actions intending to promote social and political

change. Similarly, Gustafsson et al. (2008), focusing on Swedish Facebook users, determine that both politically active and non-active participants consider their participation in political Facebook groups and other campaign-related activities as a form of *semi-public identity management*. Along the same lines, Macafee (2013) finds that one of the main motivations driving young people's political usage of Facebook is to present themselves to their peers in a certain way; the other two main motivations are social engagement and the sharing of information.

Research illustrates that the ways in which individuals employ SNSs are influenced by considerations of their privacy and audiences. Livingstone (2008) explains that online privacy is undermined by the very nature of SNSs and notes how these online platforms display, as standard, personal information that previous generations have regarded as private, notably age, politics, income, religion, and sexual preference. As explained in Section 2.3, identity management on SNSs is a particularly complex process due to the emergence of *networked publics* which are shaped by the presence of invisible audiences, the formation of a collapsed audience, and the blurring of public and private spheres (boyd 2011). In her book on the social lives of networked teens, boyd (2014) further stresses that what makes impression management on SNSs so complicated is the networked settings where teenagers operate. Using these online platforms, self-presentation is constructed through information explicitly provided by users, what their friends share, and how other people respond to these activities (boyd 2014). To successfully participate on SNSs, users therefore have to take into account the ways in which others might interpret their behaviours (Kimmons 2014), and subsequently develop a series of disclosure strategies (Vitak 2012). Among the various disclosure strategies users can adopt, Sleeper et al. (2013) and Brake (2014) highlight that the most common one is self-censorship. This behaviour is consistent with the *lowest common denominator* strategy identified by Hogan (2010), which consists of making disclosures that are appropriate for all members of the network (Marwick and boyd 2011; Vitak 2012). In the same way, drawing from 40 in-depth interviews with Italian Facebook users, Litt (2012) shows that users often implement strategies of content homogenisation so as to manage their online presences in ways which are acceptable to most of their contacts.

The above studies demonstrate that SNS users' self-presentation and online activities are influenced by perceptions of their imagined audiences. The present research indicated that this principle also applies to political participation and finds support in several other investigations (Gustafsson 2012; Storsul 2014; Thorson 2014; Vromen et al. 2015; Weinstein, 2014). Focusing on political talk, Thorson (2014) observes that there is a high

level of variation among Facebook users in what is perceived to be acceptable to post. In order to preserve one's reputation and avoid possible offence or misinterpretation, a user may engage in protective strategies and endorse a neutral version of politics (Thorson 2014). Likewise, concentrating on non-organised respondents, Gustafsson (2012) indicates that on Facebook, engagement in politically related activities is often limited by users' reluctance to make their political views known. Weinstein (2014) corroborates these findings in relation to a specific group of Facebook users – politically engaged youths – and establishes that while most will express their political identity online, a minority of users (20% of the sample) refrain from sharing. These users may mask their identities on SNSs due to personal concerns about privacy, perceptions of their audiences as uninterested or hostile, and the possibility that expressing political opinions online may have unwanted implications in their offline lives. Focusing also on politically engaged youths, Vromen et al. (2015) and Storsul (2014) produce similar results. The former determine that young activists in the UK are sensitive about the public visibility of social media and often use email lists to protect their anonymity. Storsul (2014) finds that teenagers' high awareness of self-representation influences how they use Facebook for political purposes. They are careful in selecting which groups to join and which causes to support, and try to avoid standing out as very political, something that also clearly emerged in the present study (see Section 5.1.2) during the interview with Hilary (BP). In this sense, Storsul (2014) confirms the relevance of the *lowest common denominator* strategy also for political participation on SNSs, with teenagers perceiving engagement in political debate as particularly risky and only posting things that they believe most of their friends will not find offensive.

In light of these considerations, Goffman's (1957) dramaturgical approach is a fruitful framework through which to examine the dynamics of self-presentation, and how these dynamics can affect Facebook political participation. As discussed in Section 2.3, Goffman (1959) approaches the issue of self-presentation from a dramaturgical perspective, describing the interactions between individuals and their audiences as performance. This performance is given on a *front stage*, as opposed to the *back stage* which is the place where individuals retreat and step out of their role and thus where a more authentic self resides. Such a dramaturgical approach emphasises the dichotomy between the public and the private. The *private* refers to the realm of personal intimacy, to something hidden or withdrawn, while the *public* constitutes what is open, revealed, or accessible (Slater 1998; Weintraub 1997). Goffman's (1959) original approach focuses on face-to-face situations, in which interaction is considered "the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one

another's immediate physical presence" (p. 26). Focusing on TV, Meyrowitz (1985) applies Goffman's model to electronic broadcasting media and, considering the blurring of the public/private boundaries caused by the diffusion of electronic media, updates the model by adding a middle region which "contains elements of both the former onstage and offstage behaviour, but lacks their extremes" (p. 78). This middle region, however, is not applicable to Facebook where the front stage is magnified, leading to a hyper-ritualisation. The concept of hyper-ritualisation is developed in Goffman's (1979) later work when he examines the representation of gender in magazine advertisements in which, he explains, an editing of real life and an exaggeration of its rituals occurs. Similarly, Aspling (2011) contends that Facebook activity is concerned with staging a successful character through performances that exaggerate Goffman's model. Aspling (2011) argues that Facebook users operate on a front stage that covers a variety of social relations and is even more public and intensified than the Goffmanian front stage. For these reasons Facebook users are controlled in their behaviour, careful to portray only the most successful and interesting sides of their lives (Aspling 2011). In this sense, Madden and Smith (2010) show that in order to craft their *hoped-for online personas*, Facebook users adopt a set of counter-measures such as untagging photos or deleting wall posts that might place them in a negative light so to make sure that the presentation is balanced the way they want it to be. In his study on political Facebook groups, Marichal (2013) develops a similar argument and describes Facebook as a *digital front stage*. He asserts that in the Facebook *nonymous* (as opposed to anonymous) environment, users seek to construct idealised political identities and employ Facebook groups for expressive political performance.

Facebook can therefore be considered a digital front stage, where self-presentation is crucial. In their quest for acceptance and popularity, Facebook users craft their identities so as to appeal to their social network. Despite living in an era in which freedom of expression is highly valued, SNS users resort to various tactics including self-censorship in order to stage a successful character. Qualitative data from the present research suggested that the composition of a user's social network plays a key role in the likelihood of an individual engaging in protective self-presentation, a type of self-presentation aimed at avoiding disapproval (Arkin 1981). This can clearly be seen in the interviews with Hilary and Callum who both attributed their lack of political participation on Facebook to the presence of people with contrasting political beliefs in their Facebook networks (see Section 5.1.2). The links between network composition and political participation are highlighted by numerous authors. Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) speak of *cross-pressures* restraining political engagement,

and several studies find that exposure to opposing political opinions can inhibit participation (Dilliplane 2011; Hayes et al. 2006; Knobloch-Westerwick and Johnson 2014; Matthes 2012; Moy et al. 2001; Mutz 2002; 2006; Visser and Mirabile 2004). Some authors explain these links with reference to the theory of selective exposure presented in Section 3.2. For instance, Hayes et al. (2006), Mutz (2002, 2006) and Visser and Mirabile (2004) reason that the exposure to opposing political opinions can lead to psychological ambivalence and decrease expression of political opinion and participation. Mutz (2006) associates the exposure to contrasting political ideas, which she names *cross-cutting exposure*, to the heterogeneity of the discussion network. She argues that in cross-cutting networks people tend to withdraw from political activity, not only because of political ambivalence but also so as not to endanger social relationships (Mutz 2006).

Regarding the specific case of SNSs, Rui and Stefanone (2013) demonstrate a positive association between audience diversity and protective self-presentation. Grevet et al. (2014) investigate political disagreements on Facebook among politically engaged users, determining that participants who perceive more variety among their friends participate less than those perceiving more homogeneity. Similarly, Vraga et al. (2015) examine how individual predispositions, perceptions of the Facebook political climate, and network characteristics influence the posting of political content on Facebook. Their results suggest that predispositions like political interest and conflict avoidance impact on users' perception of the political climate and the potential for contentious political disagreement that influence willingness to post about politics.

Particularly relevant to the present study is Kwon et al.'s (2014) article which applies Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory to SNSs. In her study on public opinion formation, German political scientist Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974) develops the Spiral of Silence theory. The core tenet of this theory is that people are inclined towards social conformity when expressing their opinions. People form impressions of the distribution of opinions through media messages and interpersonal encounters. When they think they are in the minority, they tend to avoid isolation by keeping their opinions to themselves and aligning to observed standards. In this sense, public opinion can be conceived of as the product of individual opinions selectively expressed as a response to perceived social consensus (Noelle-Neumann 1974, 1993). Kwon et al. (2014) establish that exposure to diverse opinions on SNSs is positively associated with self-censorship of political expression and explain this association through the Spiral of Silence theory. They argue that three elements typical of SNSs – reduced privacy, integration of multiple social contexts, and

increase in exposure to different opinions – affect users’ willingness to express political opinions. Furthermore, they contend that the effects of these three elements are contingent upon users’ perceptions of the level of *private-ness of communication* offered by the technology (Kwon et al. 2014). Their arguments find support in Hampton et al.’s (2014) recent study for the Pew Research Center. Hampton et al. (2014) examine the potential of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to operate as alternative discussion venues for individuals holding minority views in relation to the Snowden leaks, also considering the willingness of users to talk about the leaks in various face-to-face and online settings. Their study shows that people were less willing to discuss the Snowden revelations on social media than they were in person and, in line with the Spiral of Silence theory, that in both settings participants were more likely to voice their opinion if they perceived that their audience shared their views (Hampton et al. 2014).

However, scholars have not reached an agreement concerning the restraining effect of network heterogeneity on political participation, with several studies also finding positive links between political heterogeneity, political participation and knowledge (Bae 2013; Ikeda and Boase 2012; Kwak et al. 2005; Scheufele et al. 2004, 2006). Similarly, in the present research, the network heterogeneity associated with the semi-public nature of Facebook did not limit all participants’ political participation on Facebook. In particular, the likelihood of engaging in protective self-presentation on Facebook appeared to vary in the two considered samples. BPs were more likely to be affected by network heterogeneity and to limit their political participation on Facebook due to the presence of certain people within their network (see Section 5.1.2). However, caution is required before attributing the varying impact of the semi-public nature of Facebook on political participation to national factors. The previous section discussed the ways in which the differences between the samples’ political participation on Facebook can be linked to the diverse media and political scenarios of Italy and the UK. It was possible to develop such an argument given the presence of a great deal of research dealing with these issues. In contrast, there is a substantial lack of studies examining privacy and self-presentation from a cross-national perspective (see Section 6.7). As such, the findings in this study could simply be peculiar to the two selected samples, rather than linked to characteristics of British and Italian cultures.

This section has highlighted the relevance of self-presentation in relation to Facebook political participation. The present investigation indicated that privacy concerns and the semi-public nature of Facebook had a varying impact on the samples’ political participation. In order to explain this outcome, the purpose and orientation of political participation on

SNSs were considered. In this sense, it appears that political participation in the Facebook environment does not necessarily aim to influence governments or other citizens, but can also be interpreted as a form of identity-management. Facebook can be described as a political front stage where users engage in elaborate performances to express idealised political identities. To this end, considerations about audiences are paramount and individuals often resort to protective strategies such as self-censorship in order to preserve their images. According to the findings of this study, the presence of friends holding contrasting political views can limit a person's political participation. This occurred particularly in the BS. In the previous section the differences between the samples' levels of political participation were, in part, attributed to contextual factors (i.e., media and political scenarios) characterising Italy and the UK. Here, the participatory gap has been explained with the fact that the semi-public nature of Facebook and network political heterogeneity produced a stronger restraining effect on BPs' political participation.

6.3 Facebook as a Potential Antidote against Political Fragmentation and Polarisation

In the two previous sections, differences in the samples' scores have been considered and contextual factors mediating the contributions of Facebook to political participation identified. This and the next section move away from the emic dimension and adopt a more etic approach (see Section 4.2 for an explanation of the emic-etic distinction). In doing so, they discuss results that are common to both samples and work towards the development of a more general theory of Facebook political participation.

This section focuses in particular on one of the main criticisms levelled against digital media, namely their potential to encourage political fragmentation and polarisation (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Habermas 2006; Polat 2005; Sunstein 2001; Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2009). As highlighted in Section 3.2, this possible limitation of digital technologies has been explained with reference to their alleged tendency to foster selective exposure. Research has, however, produced contrasting evidence in this regard, with some studies confirming that the Internet and SNSs increasingly expose individuals to pro-attitudinal perspectives (Adamic and Glance 2005; Bimber and Davis 2003; Kushin and Kitchener 2009; Meyer 2012; Nie et al. 2010; Stroud 2008) and others establishing that these technologies can promote the exposure to political difference (An et al. 2011; Bae 2013; Halpern and Gibbs 2013;

Hermida et al. 2011; Kim 2011; Kushin and Kitchener 2009; Lee et al. 2014; Messing and Westwood 2012; Mitchell et al. 2013; Vickery 2009).

In line with Weeks and Holbert's study (2013), the present investigation provided elements in support of both stances and found that Facebook users are exposed to both consonant and dissonant political information (see Section 5.2.2). Results suggested that the likelihood of encountering political difference is strictly linked to the ways Facebook users obtain information: when participants actively search for and select political information, they often end up consuming content which reinforces their political views, while when the consumption is accidental, the possibility of being exposed to political difference increases. In accordance with this finding, research highlights that the circulation of information on SNSs can occur through either voluntary or accidental mechanisms, with users proactively selecting the information by following or visiting pages/profiles of news broadcasters, or accidentally stumbling upon content shared by their network while navigating a SNS (Barker et al. 2013; Leung and Lee 2014; Weeks and Holbert 2013). Among the various Internet tools, users of SNSs appear to be particularly prone to accidental exposure (Baresch et al. 2011; Chadwick 2012). In this sense, Lerman and Ghosh (2010) analyse the mechanisms of news diffusion on SNSs and speak of *information contagion*. By means of sharing, liking and retweeting, accidental exposure to information can easily occur, as individuals do not always choose what to consume, often accepting information which is presented to them by others (Chadwick 2012). Considering such dynamics, SNS users could therefore bypass selective exposure which relies on the active role of the audience (Dutta-Bergman and Chung 2005) and encounter political difference. Focusing on the case of Facebook, Kushin and Kitchener (2009) support this theory and argue that the push feature of this SNS may increase the exposure to contrasting viewpoints, leading eventually to discussion among opposing parties. This position is shared by Halpern and Gibbs (2013), who highlight how Facebook can expand the information flow, with posts reaching not only the intended audience but also the poster's broader social network and friends of friends, enabling the development of discussions involving more diverse viewpoints. The present research confirmed these findings and indicated that the News Feed plays a central role in this process by assuming a broadcasting function and disseminating information to which users are often exposed accidentally.

It is evident, as also noted by Pedroni et al. (2014), that dynamics surprisingly consistent with mass media models in terms of passivity, content production and content consumption apply to Facebook (this issue is further addressed in Section 6.5). As is customary with

traditional (i.e., push) media, Facebook users can passively consume information posted by their contacts (i.e., friends and pages they follow) through the News Feed. However, they can also choose to follow a certain page or news outlet, in this way making a conscious choice and operating proactively, a distinctive element of new (i.e., pull) media audiences (see Section 2.2, p. 25, for a distinction between push and pull media). These dynamics are congruent with Tewksbury and Rittenberg's (2012) analysis of the process behind the online consumption of news and political information which is described by them as a *multistep process*.

As previously touched upon, when users actively search for and select political information, usually it will be content which reinforces their current viewpoints. Whereas, when users accidentally stumble upon and consume information that they did not necessarily seek out, they are far more likely to be exposed to political difference. Nonetheless, it must be noted that the results showed that active selection of information does not automatically lead to selective exposure, with individuals who display high levels of political interest and partisanship searching occasionally for politically-diverse information (see Antonio's quote at p. 140). Johnson and Kaye (2013b) confirm this possibility and find that deliberate exposure to political difference could be driven by a genuine interest in knowing both sides of an issue or by the desire to obtain ammunition to use against the opposing side. These findings are supported by Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng (2009), who establish that, while attitude-consistent exposure dominates online, the selection of counter-attitudinal information is more likely among participants with greater interest in politics and stronger party preference, and by Knobloch-Westerwick and Johnson (2014), who determine that greater political interest increases online news use which, in turn, reduces selective exposure to attitude-consistent news.

Active selection of information therefore does not necessarily result in selective exposure. Similarly, accidental exposure does not guarantee on its own the access to counter-attitudinal political information. Results showed that in order to obtain politically diverse information through the accidental route, and to bypass selective exposure, a politically interested and politically-heterogeneous network of contacts is required (see Section 5.2.2). The relevance of the Facebook network for the information gathering process is stressed by several authors such as Vickery (2009), Lampe et al. (2012), and Lee et al. (2014). The first states that the level of political involvement of one's network strongly influences the degree of exposure to political information, while Lampe et al. (2012) claim that users with larger and more diverse networks will most likely obtain less redundant information. Along the same lines,

Lee et al. (2014) emphasise that SNS usage is positively associated with network heterogeneity which leads, in turn, to the consumption of non-consonant political information. The findings of the present research regarding the differences between Facebook, Internet and offline political discussion (see Section 5.2.3) and the proliferation of information sources (see Section 5.2.2) support these assertions. As discussed in Section 2.3, one of the greatest affordances of SNSs, which can be described as *social supernets* (Donath and boyd 2004), is precisely that of facilitating relationship maintenance, enabling users to keep up with larger networks than would be possible in the offline world (Donath and boyd 2004; Ellison et al. 2011; Hampton et al. 2011). In line with Ellison et al.'s (2011) considerations, the ability of SNSs to enlarge individuals' social networks has important consequences as it can expose users to more diverse weak ties and expand the range of available information sources (see Granovetter – 1973 – for an account of the impact of weak ties on the diffusion of information). Therefore, it would be plausible to contend that the expansion and diversification of users' social networks made possible by Facebook can promote cross-cutting discussion and the consumption of politically diverse information.

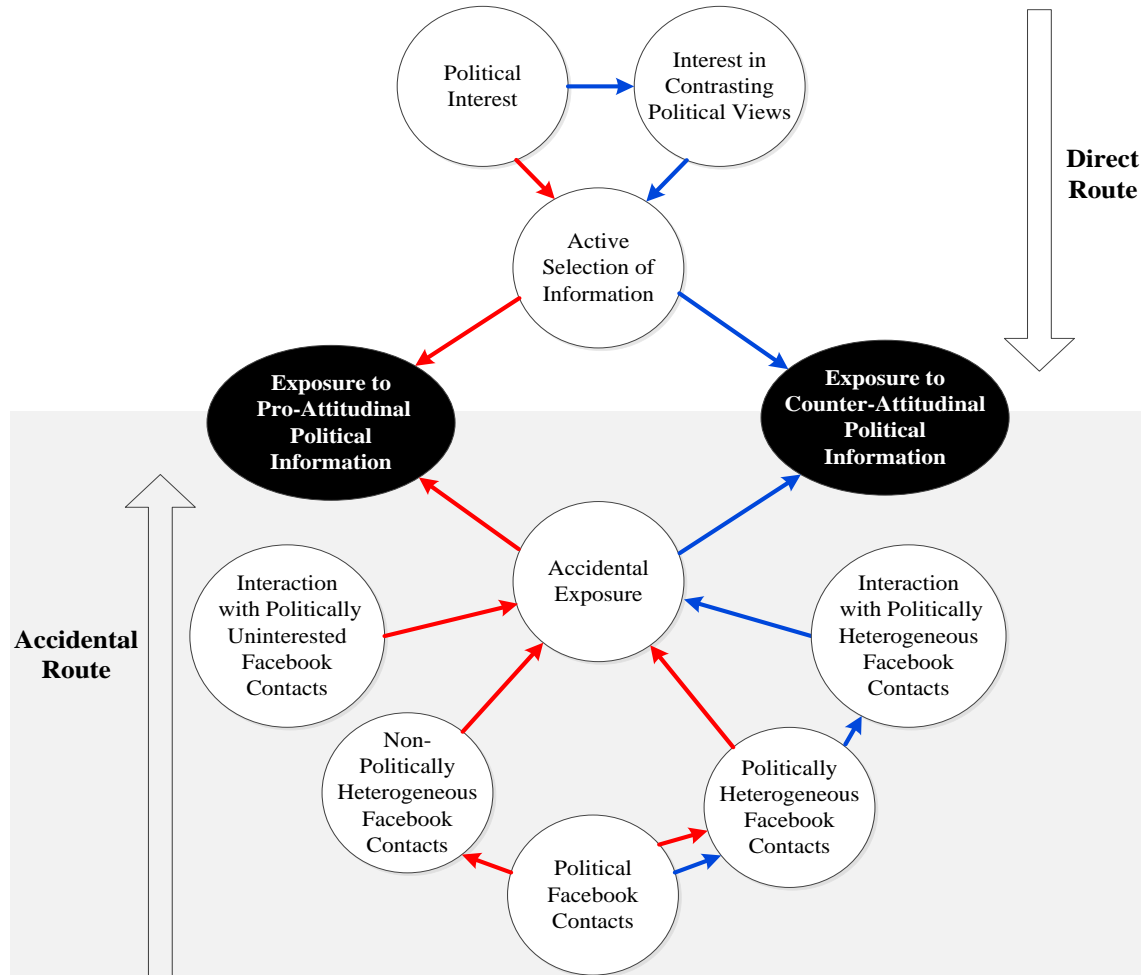
Nonetheless, the results from the present research demonstrated that the presence of a diverse, politically heterogeneous network of contacts is not in itself enough to guarantee exposure to political difference. Due to the EdgeRank algorithm which regulates the flux of information appearing on users' News Feeds, interaction with a diverse range of contacts would also be required, and thus lack of interaction, or interaction with limited audiences, can possibly lead to selective exposure (see Callum's quote at p. 241).

Taking into account the findings discussed above, the Dual Routes of Exposure Model (see Figure 25) is developed. According to this model, exposure to political information can occur on this SNS through two routes: the *direct route* and the *accidental route*. In the direct route users have control over the flow of information and actively select information according to personal preferences, interests and habits, thus allowing selective exposure to take place. The direct route, however, does not guarantee selective exposure, as users may purposefully consume politically diverse information. In the present research, interviews suggested that this latter scenario is most likely to occur for individuals with high levels of political interest and/or partisanship.

In the accidental route, users are passively and inadvertently exposed to information. Similarly to the direct route, this can lead to exposure to both reinforcing and counter-attitudinal content. The former can occur if users interact exclusively with politically

uninterested or politically contiguous contacts. Conversely, in the presence of a politically interested and politically heterogeneous network, Facebook users may bypass selective exposure and acquire counter-attitudinal political information.

Figure 25 – Facebook and Selective Exposure: The Dual Routes of Exposure Model



The present study therefore contributes to the strand of research investigating the relationship between the Internet and the phenomenon of selective exposure. Focusing on the case of Facebook, it provides evidence in support of Brundidge’s (2010) *inadvertency thesis*. In the Facebook environment the diffusion of information is both an intentional and incidental process, and users may be inadvertently exposed to political difference. Through what has been labelled by Lerman and Ghosh (2010) as *information contagion*, users are presented with new opportunities to expand their discussion and information networks, thus making these networks more heterogeneous. As a result, the tendency of Internet users to operate in *echo-chambers*, where they interact only with like-minded individuals (Sunstein

2001), is somewhat counteracted on Facebook, a platform which can operate as a potential antidote against political fragmentation and polarisation. However, caution is advisable in this line of argument, as Facebook is not immune to selective exposure. Accidental exposure to counter-attitudinal perspectives is, in fact, only a component of the information consumption process, with most users still consuming political information which is continuous with their own views and engaging in discussion with like-minded individuals.

6.4 Political Participation in the Facebook Era: Information-Led

Mobilisation

The previous section has shown that by operating as a broadcasting platform abiding partially by dynamics characterising traditional mass media, Facebook can limit selective exposure and counteract, in part, political fragmentation and polarisation. The broadcasting features of this SNS, as will appear later in this section, also affect its capacity to contribute to the political participation of citizens with limited levels of political engagement and participation. Section 3.1 indicated that research in relation to this issue has produced contrasting evidence and generated an intense academic debate. Some scholars stress that the Internet and SNSs can mobilise new audiences and generate new forms of participation (i.e., optimists), while others minimise their mobilising power, emphasising their tendency to reinforce existing participatory trends (i.e., normalisers), or highlighting their limited or even negative influence on political participation (i.e., pessimists). This thesis contributes to such a debate and establishes that the contributions of Facebook to political participation vary in relation to pre-existing levels of political participation and engagement, and the considered types of political activity (i.e., communication vs mobilisation).

Quantitative and qualitative results indeed revealed that these two issues are strictly inter-related, suggesting that politically active individuals are the ones who take more advantage of the mobilisation affordances of Facebook (see Section 5.2.1), whereas less politically active participants employ this SNS mainly as a communicative and informative political tool. From the interviews it appeared that, by becoming so deeply embedded in people's daily habits, Facebook has emerged as an important political communication channel. In contrast, its contributions to more resource-expensive activities (i.e., political mobilisation) tend to be limited to politically active citizens. The value of these findings is confirmed by several investigations which consider the multidimensionality of political participation (see Section 4.1). For instance, Kavanaugh et al. (2008) establish that citizens with medium/low

levels of political engagement participate much less than politically active citizens in online formal political activities such as contacting public officials or donating to campaigns. However, both groups show similar levels of participation with regards to news consumption and political discussion. A similar picture also emerges in relation to SNSs by combining the investigations of Storsul (2014) and Vitak et al. (2011). Storsul (2014) reveals that these platforms are crucial for organising and coordinating political activities, while Vitak et al. (2011) show that young people engage on Facebook mostly in activities falling within the communication dimension of political participation, such as expressing political opinions. Such an inconsistency can be explained by the fact that Storsul (2014) focuses on politically active youths, while Vitak et al. (2011) concentrate on young people in general. In line with the results of this thesis, these findings suggest that these two different groups may use SNSs in different ways: the former taking advantage of the mobilisation affordances of these online platforms, the latter limiting their participation to communication-related activities.

Hence it appears that the main contribution of Facebook to political participation, in particular with regards to individuals who do not fall within the activist group, is within the political communication dimension. Research confirms the relevance of SNSs as political discussion platforms (Kushin and Kitchener 2009; Mascaro and Goggins 2011; Roberts and Andersen 2009) and political information sources (Baresch et al. 2011; Hermida et al. 2011; Messing and Westwood 2012; Mitchell et al. 2013; Rainie and Smith 2012; Rainie et al. 2012; Vickery 2009; Weeks and Holbert 2013). However, the fact that Facebook tends to contribute mainly to the communication dimension of political participation does not have to be undervalued and perceived as a limitation. Numerous studies, in fact, emphasise the links between political communication on SNSs and other forms of political participation (including offline participation), with consumption of political information often propelling such a shift from one mode of engagement to another (Cantijoch et al. 2013; Copeland and Bimber 2015; Della Porta 2012; Enjolras et al. 2012; Gustafsson 2012; Hamilton and Tolbert 2012; Hargittai and Shaw 2013; Rojas and Puig-i-Abril 2009; Towner 2013; Yamamoto et al. 2013). The present research establishes that, through either direct selection or accidental exposure (see previous section), Facebook can contribute to the diffusion of political information and potentially activate a *virtuous circle*, resulting in what could be described as *information-led mobilisation*. The notion of the virtuous circle is introduced by Norris (2000) who, with reference to political communication, speaks of “a ratcheting process that over the long term gradually reinforces the activism of the active” (p. 309). The findings of this thesis suggest that the virtuous circle goes beyond politically active individuals,

applying also to less politically engaged users. This is exemplified in the case of Hazel whose political interest was stirred by the information she obtained on Facebook and whose political participation originated on this SNS and subsequently was transferred to other channels (see her quote at p. 121).

In relation to the mobilisation dimension, the present research shows that Facebook is a key tool for activists in that, as confirmed in numerous investigations (Khamis and Vaughn 2012; Obar et al. 2012; Storsul 2014; Theocharis 2011; Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Valenzuela et al. 2012; Vromen et al. 2015; Warren et al. 2014), it can aid their mobilisation efforts by offering additional venues of participation, facilitating the organisation and promotion of political initiatives, and enlarging their political networks (see Section 5.2.1). Interviewed activists remarked that mobilisation on Facebook often does not derive from traditional political institutions such as parties or trade unions, and is more grassroots and single-issue in nature. These findings gain support in Bimber (1998), Anduiza et al. (2009), and Davis et al. (2009), who highlight that protest networks and single-issue campaigns have benefited more than traditional political institutions from digital technologies. In addition, these results are congruent with Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) *logic of connective action* according to which action is based on personalised frames and the sharing of information through personal networks, and Castells' (2012) *culture of autonomy*, in which individuals define their actions according to their values and interests, independently from the institutions of society.

Irrespective of the agents of mobilisation, the present investigation establishes that individuals' political interest remains crucial in triggering participation. This study therefore provides strong support to the normalisers' stance and suggests that, as a political platform, Facebook aids mostly individuals who are already politically active. Similarly to the tendency of Facebook to support mainly political communication activities in the cases of less politically active users, this finding should not be perceived in a negative light, as it is by the advocates of the rich-get-richer hypothesis (see Section 3.1). In fact, the activities of political activists can have an indirect effect on less politically engaged individuals, in turn encouraging their participation. Focusing on the 2005 British election, Curtice and Norris (2008) acknowledge that political activists may be the only ones taking advantage of the political affordances of digital technologies, but also reason that these activists may then disseminate political information more widely, even reaching less engaged voters. Similar findings are produced by Vaccari et al. (2013), who analysed Twitter discussions during the Italian 2013 general election, confirming the connection between online discussion and

offline participation. They indicate that consuming political information and engaging in discussion online affect face-to-face political discussion directly, impacting on those citizens who engage politically online, and also through a more indirect route, in that highly politically interested individuals can spread the messages encountered online to their offline personal networks (Vaccari et al. 2013). These results tie in with Graham and Wright's (2014) analysis of superparticipation in online political discussion, with superparticipants undertaking a range of positive functions such as helping other users, replying to debates, and summarising longer threads for new discussants (see Section 3.3). The findings of these studies confirm the value of Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) Two-Step Flow of Communication Model which, in contrast with the linear models of communication such as Shannon and Weaver's (1949) Mathematical Theory of Communication and Berlo's (1960) Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver Model of human communication, highlights the role of interpersonal relations and opinion leaders in mediating the effects of mass media on individuals.

The present research demonstrates that such an indirect effect can occur also on Facebook, with the broadcasting affordances of this SNS playing a crucial role in this instance. As shown, for example, in the case of Helen (see her quote at p. 121), by exposing its users to other contacts' political activities through the News Feed, Facebook can encourage political interest and lead to the participation of less politically active users. In order to activate this process, a minimum level of political interest seems, nonetheless, to be required (see Section 5.1.2). The links between accidental exposure to information and political participation are highlighted in several studies. Cho and Rudolph (2008) observe that political participation is geographically clustered. They contend that this clustering cannot be explained solely by individuals' active involvement in social networks and highlight the importance of casual observation (i.e., witnessing the activity of geographically contiguous individuals can lead to participation). Similarly, Bond et al. (2012), focusing specifically on Facebook, Morris and Morris (2013), and Copeland and Bimber (2015) examined political participation during the 2012 American presidential campaign and show that incidental exposure to political information could exert a mobilising influence. Particularly relevant to the findings of the present research is Gustafsson's (2012) investigation. Gustafsson (2012) establishes that individuals active in organisations consider Facebook as key channel for intra-organisational communication, for obtaining political news and influencing their contacts. On the other hand, he finds that many non-organised respondents – even if they do not actively participate in political discussions or other political activities themselves – are still affected by other

users' recruitment attempts and the information shared by others (e.g., information about initiatives or links posted by friends). These results are consistent with what is described by Hamilton and Tolbert (2012) as *accidental mobilisation*.

The present study thus backs up the normalisers' stance, but also provides evidence in support of the mobilisation hypothesis, with the mobilisation of less-politically active participants occurring as a consequence of their engagement in communication activity (i.e., *virtuous circle*) or endorsed by the actions of politically active individuals (e.g., *accidental mobilisation*). These findings suggest, as noted by several participants (see Section 5.1.2), that the greatest political affordance of Facebook is its informative and communicative power and its capability to bring politics into people's day-to-day lives. According to the results, the communicative power of this platform and its consequent mobilisation capacity are dependent upon two factors. The first factor is the expansion and diversification of users' networks. As discussed in the previous section, Facebook simplifies the management of a larger number of social relationships, and facilitates interactions with users who are geographically distant or are not part of one's network. Due to the expansion of users' networks, a proliferation of political information sources occurs and users can potentially be exposed to a greater and more diverse range of recruitment attempts. The second factor is the flexibility that this SNS offers to its users who can access their accounts from any location and at any time of the day through mobile technologies. Facebook can therefore promote political mobilisation by reducing the thresholds of participation, providing more flexibility in terms of time and space. This is key for the mobilisation of users who are less politically engaged due to lack of resources (e.g., time) or health-related issues. The value of digital technologies for this latter category of citizens is highlighted in several studies (Anderberg and Jönsson 2005; Cheta 2004; Trevisan 2012, 2013), and was evidenced by the comments of Helen, who for health-related reasons could not participate in offline political activities, and Tracey, who was involved in campaigns aiming to raise awareness of asthma (p. 131). The enhanced flexibility offered by Facebook is not only instrumental to the influx of non-activists, but it also leads to an increase in activists' mobilisation efforts, as shown by Giuliano's and Hazel's quotes (p. 133), findings that confirm the *super size* effect of SNSs on political participation theorised by Earl and Kimport (2011).

This section has offered an analysis of the political affordances of Facebook, the SNS par excellence. It highlighted that Facebook can aid both individuals who already engage in politics and less politically active citizens, with the former taking advantage of the mobilisation capabilities of this SNS, and the latter employing it mainly as a political

communication and informative tool. Activists presented Facebook as a key tool for the organisation of political initiatives, enabling them to quickly communicate and coordinate, and to operate independently from traditional political institutions such as parties and trade unions. In this sense, this SNS emerges as particularly effective in supporting personalised action frames and single-issue campaigns. Concerning the contributions of Facebook to citizens who engage to a lesser degree in offline and online political activities, the informative power of and flexibility offered by this platform come into play. Facebook can make participation more flexible in terms of time and place, facilitating for instance individuals who do not participate due to lack of time or health-related issues. In addition, the presence of a politically active Facebook network can expose users, often accidentally, to political information, promoting political interest in the long run and producing a mobilisation effect.

6.5 The Relevance of the Offline Dimension and the Merging of New and Old Media Logics

The previous section stressed the ways in which Facebook can promote the circulation of political information, and can support mobilisation, aiding not only politically active individuals but also citizens demonstrating limited levels of political participation. However, to avoid unrealistic and over-optimist predictions, it is also necessary to acknowledge the limits and drawbacks of this SNS as a political platform. In this regard, the first issue to be considered is the extent of the presence and relevance of politics in the Facebook environment. The quantitative phase of this study indicated both samples' limited levels of Facebook political participation, and both quantitative and qualitative data established that the non-political usage of Facebook tended to exceed the political one (see Section 5.1.1). These findings suggest that Facebook is mostly used for non-political purposes, and confirm that political usages of SNSs are often overshadowed by social interaction and entertainment (Baumgartner and Morris 2010; Fuchs 2014; Mascheroni 2012). However, as in the quantitative phase participants demonstrated low scores not only on Facebook but also on the other two considered channels of political participation (i.e., the Internet and the offline world), it is possible to hypothesise that two other factors, besides the ones discussed in the previous sections, could influence the samples' limited levels of Facebook political participation. The first factor, as highlighted in the interviews, is participants' political disenchantment which limited participants' political participation, particularly with regards to political mobilisation activities (see Section 5.2.1), while the second is the timescale of the

data collection. Since, as observed by Wang (2007), most of the studies examining the links between the Internet and political participation focus heavily on the campaign environment (e.g., Bimber and Davis 2003; Curtice and Norris 2008; Davis et al. 2009; Dimitrova et al. 2014; Rice et al. 2013), the data collection in the current investigation was consciously carried out mostly in non-electoral periods (see Timescale of data collection in Section 4.4.3). Considering that political activity online, and also offline, fluctuates according to the proximity of elections, reaching its peaks in periods immediately prior to elections (Jensen and Anduiza 2012; Larson 2014), the choice of this specific timescale could have in part impacted on the samples' levels of political participation. In light of these considerations, on the one hand it would be plausible to assume that Facebook is mainly used for non-political purposes, but on the other hand it has to be acknowledged that the gap between political and non-political usages which surfaced in this thesis will most likely close during electoral periods.

Going back to the limitations of Facebook as a political platform, as stressed in Rachel and Mario's interviews, it clearly emerged in the present research that Facebook is not universal (see quotes at pp. 121-122). As shown in Appendix A, Facebook reaches around 50% of the British population, while in Italy its penetration is even lower, approximately 40% (Socialbakers 2013). In Section 2.2 the notion of digital divide was introduced, referring to the gap in access to and usage of digital technologies (van Dijk, 2009). Taking into account the gap between Facebook users and the rest of the population who are not on this SNS, it would be possible to talk of the presence of a *Facebook divide*. In this sense van Dijk (2012) stresses that modern society is in the process of becoming a *network society*, but cannot yet be considered as such because there are segments of the population that do not have access to or that scarcely use digital technologies. Unsurprisingly, several studies focusing on the Italian and British contexts show that TV remains the main source of political information, principally for older people, with the Internet and SNSs gradually growing in importance, particularly for younger people (AGCOM 2013; Chadwick 2013; Cremonesi et al. 2014; Dutton and Blank 2013; Gibson et al. 2010; Papathanassopoulos et al. 2013; Scaglioni, and Sfardini 2013; Williamson 2010). This trend has been confirmed in the 2015 British general election, with the televised debates dominating the political campaign. Among the studies reported above, Papathanassopoulos et al.'s (2013) is particularly worth mentioning, as it also focuses – among other countries (11 in total) – on Italy and the UK. This study indicates that the proportion of people claiming to regularly view television news is higher than that applicable to the Internet in 9 out of 11 countries. Italy shows the highest average in terms of

TV news consumption, while the exceptions are Norway and South Korea, two countries whose populations have widespread access to broadband Internet (Papathanassopoulos et al. 2013).

Aside from media habits, the present study suggests another possible reason behind the popularity of traditional media as political information sources. Although the relevance of SNSs as political information sources is constantly growing, with many users relying on political information obtained through these platforms, concerns about the credibility of this information surfaced in the interviews, with participants stressing the abundance of bogus news on Facebook (see Section 5.2.2). In the same vein, Gangadharbatla et al. (2014) show that, despite the fact that young adults prefer to use social media for news gathering, they still perceive traditional media as more credible. Likewise, comparing SNSs to eight other online information sources (i.e., political blogs, political websites, candidates' websites, candidates' blogs, YouTube, online broadcast TV news, online cable TV news, and online newspapers), Johnson and Kaye (2014) establish that politically interested users rank these online platforms as the least credible source.

In light of the non-universality of Facebook, its questionable credibility as a political information source, and the enduring reliance of people on traditional media, considerations of the ways in which political organisations, candidates and movements should harness Facebook, and online media more generally, are required. This study establishes that Facebook can be a valuable campaigning tool but, as presented in Appendix A, the Facebook population has very specific characteristics. Hence to develop effective political campaigns, political entities have to cater also to those individuals who are not on this SNS. For instance, Rachel provided an example of how integration of both new and more traditional methods can overcome this usage (often generational) gap. She mentioned the case of Friends of Union Terrace Gardens (see p. 121), a Scottish based organisation aiming to prevent large scale development in Aberdeen's Union Terrace Garden. She explained that in order to reach its older members, this organisation has combined online communication tools (i.e., Facebook page and website) with more traditional methods such as letters. Therefore, when activists use Facebook as the only mobilisation platform, they deprive the citizens who are not on this SNS of a wealth of information and, consequently, limit their opportunities of participation.

In this sense some of the most politically active participants (e.g., Mario and Francesca) stressed that the mobilising force of Facebook seems to depend, at least in part, on its

connection with the offline world, with this SNS mainly supporting political entities that already exist and operate offline (see quotes at p. 132). Despite his techno-optimism, even Castells (2010, 2012) acknowledges that the new social movements which use the Internet as their main organisational forum “do not exist only on the Internet [but] also root themselves in their local lives, and in face to face interaction” (Castells 2010, p. 11), and can operate as a transformative force only by reclaiming urban spaces. Kavada (2010) also stresses that online communication does not necessarily lead to durable and effective activists’ networks, with regular face-to-face meetings still necessary. Fuchs (2014) is even more categorical and, assuming a social deterministic stance, he argues that “there are no Twitter-, Facebook- or YouTube- revolutions. Only people who live under certain social conditions and organize collectively can make rebellions and revolutions. Technology is, in itself, not a revolution” (Fuchs 2014, p. 102).

The necessity and value of integrating online and offline activities is demonstrated by the accomplishments of political movements and parties which have used the online/offline inter-relation to their advantage. Hara (2008) highlights that a distinctive advantage of MoveOn, a popular US based public policy advocacy and political action group, is its ability to bridge online and offline worlds. In Italy, following this example, the M5S built its success by combining online activity with an offline presence in public squares, with activities on the *beppegrillo.it* blog and SNSs spreading out to the local/offline level and creating opportunities for involvement (Barbieri 2014; Bartlett et al. 2013; Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013). Such an interplay between online activism and offline actions was crucial also to the Spanish Indignados, who exploited digital platforms such as Facebook for the organisation of mass gatherings in the streets (Micó and Casero-Ripollés 2014).

The strong connection between the online and offline dimensions of political participation is arguably linked to the hybrid nature of today’s media. With reference to the case of the M5S, Barisione et al. (2014) stress the hybrid and interconnected nature of contemporary media systems, where political actors can obtain coverage and be successful even in arenas where they don’t play a direct role (i.e., Grillo in TV). The notion of hybridity in today’s media is tackled by Chadwick (2013) in his recent work, *Hybrid Media Systems*. Taking into account the changes in today’s political communication environments due to the diffusion of new communication technologies, Chadwick (2013) considers the interaction among political actors, media, and publics in the US and the UK, and develops the notion of the *hybrid media system*. The hybrid media system “is built upon interactions among old and new media logics – where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and

organizational forms – in the reflexively connected fields of media and politics” (Chadwick 2013, p. 4). The hybrid media system is therefore characterised by adaptation and interdependence, conflict and competition between newer and older media practices in the fields of media and politics. This idea is, in a way, linked to Jenkins’s (2006) notion of media convergence, defined as a “flow of content across multiple media platforms” (p. 3), an ongoing process that does not lead to the displacement of traditional media but to an interaction between different media practices and platforms (Jenkins 2006).

Chadwick (2013) highlights a series of implications that such a hybridity has on political communication, implications that have been confirmed also in the present research. With respect to the sphere of political activism, Chadwick (2013) uses as an example the political activist movement 38 Degrees which, akin to the M5S or the Indignados, integrates offline and online repertoires to its advantage. He observes how new media can aid and fuel grassroots activism, but also stresses the ways in which organised parties, candidates’ campaigns, and the mass medium of television still dominate politics today. Consequently, he maintains that in the hybrid media system there is an asymmetrical interdependence between newer and older media logics, which is evident in election campaigning where the balance remains skewed towards the latter (Chadwick 2013).

In relation to the consumption and production of news, Chadwick (2013) notes how in the hybrid media system there is a balance between the older logics of transmission and reception and the newer logics of circulation, recirculation, and negotiation. Through new media, individuals and activist groups can intervene in the news-making process. In this sense, it is possible to talk of *informational exuberance*, namely “the willingness of nonelites to contribute to the collective production, reworking, and sharing of media content” (Chadwick 2012, p. 40). Yet professional media broadcasters find new opportunities and resources online, dominating in this setting as well as offline. The results of the present research clearly highlighted such trends, with participants stressing that, despite the multiplication of sources and the greater availability of alternative information, content produced by established media organisations still monopolises their informational diet (see Section 5.2.2).

Therefore, in today’s political communication environment old and new media logics integrate and compete with one another. Considering Altheide and Snow’s (1979) theoretical approach to media logics and applying it to social media, Klinger and Svensson (2014) argue that these platforms are characterised by a logic which is different to, but also overlaps, that

of traditional mass media. As exemplified in the table below, taking into account three sub-dimensions (i.e., production, distribution and media usage) they distinguish between mass media and network media logics.

Table 20 – Mass Media Logic vs Network Media Logic

	Mass Media Logic	Network Media Logic
Production	Expensive information selection and content generation by professional journalists according to news values	Inexpensive information selection and content generation by (lay) users according to their individual preferences
Distribution	Content selected by expert/professional gatekeepers – based on established news values – distributed to a paying fixed audience of subscribers	Users are like intermediaries, distributing popular content, sometimes like a chain letter, within networks of like-minded others
Media Usage	Location bound mass audience with limited selective exposure oriented towards passive consumption of information, based on professional selection	Interest-bound and like-minded peer networks with highly selective exposure oriented towards interaction through practices of updating

Adapted from Klinger and Svensson (2014, p. 6)

With reference to Chadwick’s (2013) notion of the hybrid media system, Klinger and Svensson (2014) acknowledge that mass media logic is not becoming obsolete and marginal and that it overlaps and interacts with network media logic. On the other hand, they also stress that these two logics are distinct and “social media platforms follow other rules of the game than traditional mass media” (Klinger and Svensson 2014, p. 11). The findings of this thesis advocate for a different interpretation and suggest the rise of a media logic that is based on a number of principles exemplary of mass media, to which it adds novel elements characteristic of new media. In this sense, rather than speaking of a brand-new media logic, it would be more appropriate to talk of an *evolved media logic*. In their influential article, “The End of Mass Communication?”, Chaffee and Metzger (2001) identify three defining features of mass communication: mass production, lack of individual control, and the presence of a limited number of available channels. Considering the rise of new media, they warn researchers not to apply old models of mass communication to new media because of their key differences to traditional ones. Their observations are valid with regards to content production and availability of communication channels, but less relevant to the role of the

audience: in the new media environment, users are not always in control and the communication process is not always a two-way interactive exchange. In this sense, Sections 6.3 and 6.4 have shown how Facebook users can obtain political information through either proactive selection, abiding by dynamics unique to new media, or through accidental exposure via the News Feed, in line with the broadcasting model of communication which typifies traditional media. Users' partial lack of control over the information and recruitment attempts to which they are exposed, and the consequent effect on their political participation, could also explain why it appeared in the present research that Facebook political participation is influenced more by the time users spent on it and their levels of participation in non-political activities, rather than the different ways people employ this SNS (see Section 5.3.3). These findings disagree with numerous studies establishing that informational usages of digital technologies tend to promote political participation while entertainment related usages hinder it (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011; Kim et al., 2013; Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002).

This section began by highlighting the limitations of Facebook, stressing the fact that this SNS is not universal and how in Italy and the UK TV remains the main source of political information. It then considered the links between Facebook and the offline world and suggested that the mobilising force of this platform rests, at least in part, on its connection with the offline world, as demonstrated by the success of the M5S and 38 Degrees. In light of these considerations, Chadwick's (2013) notion of the hybrid media system has been examined and validated through the findings produced in the present study. Keeping in mind this hybridity, the final part of the section reasoned that, with regards to Facebook and online platforms more generally, it is not possible to speak of a new media logic, but would be more appropriate to talk of an updated or even merged media logic which combines elements of both old and new media in terms of content production, consumption and dissemination.

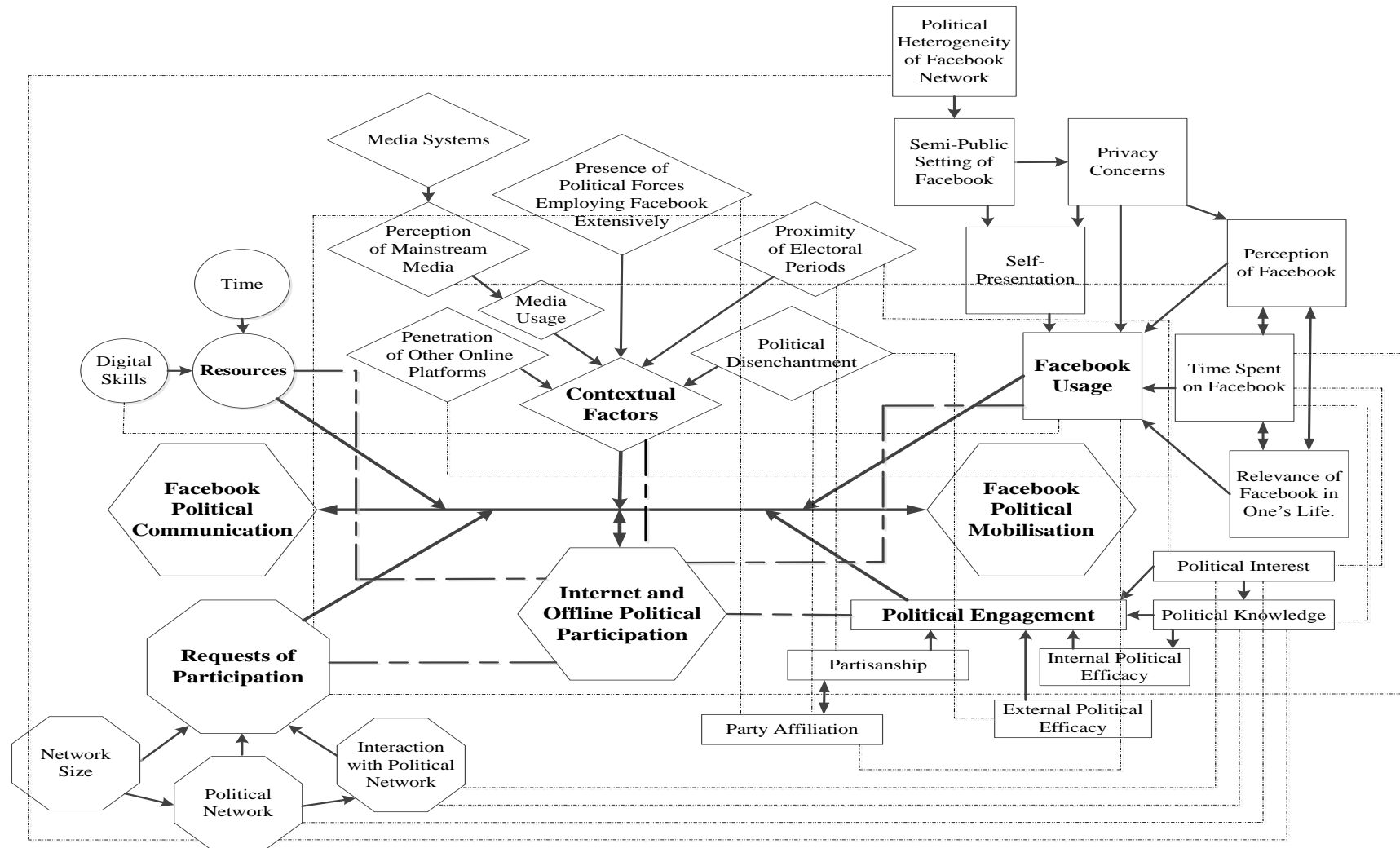
6.6 The Particularised Model of Facebook Political Participation

In Section 2.1.2, various models of political participation were presented: the Social Psychological Model, the Rational Choice Model, the General Incentives Model, the Mobilisation Model, and the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM). These models identify a number of determinants of political participation: resources, recruitment requests, political engagement, social norms, expected benefits, and (selective, outcome, process, and ideological) incentives. Furthermore, there are number of other factors such as demographic variables (i.e., gender, age, education, and occupation) and media usage, the association of which to political participation has been highlighted by research. These factors are not directly included in the above models but their impact on political participation can be explained employing these models as frameworks (see p. 20).

Taking into account such models and the findings of the present research, a model of Facebook political participation is developed in this section. After considering how the contributions of Facebook to political participation vary in the Italian and British contexts, the differences among various forms of political participation and Facebook usage practices, and the links between Facebook, Internet and offline political participation, six clusters of factors affecting Facebook political participation have been identified: resources, recruitment requests, political engagement, Facebook usage, contextual factors, and Internet and offline political participation. These clusters encompass a number of sub-components (25 in total), together forming the Particularised Model of Facebook Political Participation (PMFPP), see Figure 26.

Some of the clusters within the PMFPP have already been identified in previous models of political participation. Resources, recruitment requests, and political engagement, for instance, form Verba et al.'s (1995) CVM which is arguably the most influential model of political participation developed thus far. Resources are identified by Verba et al. (1995) as the main component of their model and the present research confirms their relevance with respect to political participation on Facebook. For instance, the tendency of both samples to engage more often in political communication activities than in mobilisation ones (see Section 5.2.1) can be explained through a resource-based approach, with the first type of activity easier to engage in because less resource-expensive than the ones falling under the mobilisation dimension.

Figure 26 – The Particularised Model of Facebook Political Participation



In the present study, time and digital skills emerged as the most relevant resources for participants' Facebook political participation. The importance of time is evident when looking at how Facebook can aid citizens' political participation, particularly in relation to individuals demonstrating low levels of political activity. As highlighted in Section 5.1.2 and discussed in Section 6.4, Facebook promotes political participation by making it more flexible. Facebook users can access their accounts from any location and at any time of the day, a flexibility which can bring politics into users' day-to-day lives, facilitating more political participation. These findings accrue support in Papacharissi (2002) and Hauben and Hauben (1997) who, focusing on political discussion, stress that the online medium guarantees greater flexibility by allowing users to reach geographically distant interlocutors and enabling them to fit political discussions within their daily schedules, and in Gustafsson (2012) and Vromen et al. (2015) who concentrate specifically on SNSs, emphasising that these platforms can reduce the thresholds of participation, decreasing the costs of communication and coordination.

With regards to the relevance of digital skills for Facebook political participation, the case of Kaye (see quote at p. 122) is emblematic and shows, as also highlighted by Borrero et al. (2014), Gangadharbatla et al. (2014), and Hargittai and Shaw (2013), how proficiency in the usage of digital technologies can positively influence the likelihood of engaging in political activities on SNSs. Digital skills are linked to the notion of *digital literacy* which falls within the larger concept of *media literacy*, namely "the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts" (Livingstone 2004, p. 3). Digital literacy in Gilster's (1997) original account refers to a set of information skills required on the Internet. However, due to changes in the online environment and in today's society, such a notion has evolved, becoming much broader, now encompassing skills relating to the creation and sharing of content, as well as users' expression, interaction and engagement (see Meyers et al. – 2014 – for a detailed discussion of digital literacy and the evolution of such a notion).

Researchers dealing with the issue of the digital divide also stress the links between digital skills and the usage (both political and non-political) of online technologies. In this sense, Jenkins (2006) argues that the major drawback of media convergence is the *participation gap*. Media convergence encourages users to engage in content production and distribution, activities which require access to technologies and specific skills, resulting in the exclusion of certain audiences (Jenkins 2006). Similarly, van Dijk (2009) refers to a *usage gap* and finds that experienced users, people with high education, and young users employ online applications more than inexperienced users, people with low education, and senior users.

The influence of education on Internet usage has also been established by Bonfadelli (2002), who determines that more educated people use the Internet in a more information-oriented way, while less educated users are more prone to an entertainment-based use (see Section 4.1 for an explanation of the differing impact of informational and entertainment uses of the Internet on political participation). Congruently, in a recent report for the European Commission, Pantea and Martens (2013) show that tertiary education is negatively correlated with time spent on leisure websites and positively associated with time spent on service websites. In light of these findings, the links found in the present research between age, education, occupation and political participation (see Section 5.3.1) could be explained, in part, on the basis of differences in digital skills.

The second component of the CVM and the primary element of another model of political participation, the Mobilisation Model (see Section 2.1.2 for literature highlighting the impact of the recruitment network on political participation) are recruitment requests, i.e., requests to participate politically. As is the case for resources, the present study confirms the relevance of recruitment requests for Facebook political participation. As shown in Figure 26, the amount of recruitment requests to which Facebook users are exposed is linked to the size of the Facebook network, the presence of politically active contacts within the network and interaction with such contacts. In Section 2.4, it was indicated that Facebook can help in the management of a larger number of social relationships. Its infrastructure and features facilitate interactions with users who are geographically distant or are not part of one's network, hence expanding users' recruitment networks, consequently providing individuals with more chances to participate. Anduiza et al. (2009) underline the links between online recruitment networks and political participation, arguing that the Internet can influence mobilisation by exposing citizens to an increased number of appeals to participate and by multiplying the number of senders of such appeals. Along the same lines, Kim and Khang (2014) apply the CVM to political participation on SNSs, establishing that, among the three components of the model, recruitment is the most directly related to political participation. Results from the present study are consistent with Anduiza et al.'s (2009) and Kim and Khang's (2014) findings, and show that the main advantage of Facebook in terms of political mobilisation is that of exposing individuals to a greater amount of information on political initiatives (see Section 5.2.1). Similarly for political discussion, the expansion of the discussion network supported by Facebook can lead to more participation (see Section 5.2.3). The presence of a political network seems particularly important for individuals with limited levels of political engagement, as it means they can be accidentally exposed to

political information, a process that in the long run can increase political interest and lead to political participation (see Section 5.1.2). However, as also discussed in Section 6.3 with regards to the exposure to political difference, due to the EdgeRank algorithm the presence of a political network is not enough to guarantee exposure to political information, as interaction with politically active contacts is also necessary for political stories to appear in the News Feed.

The final component of Verba et al.'s (1995) model is political engagement. Among the various factors mediating the contributions of Facebook to political participation in the present study, political engagement appeared the most relevant one, together with Internet and offline political participation (see section 5.1.1 and 5.3.2). In this sense, findings suggest that political engagement intervenes in the process whereby the Facebook recruitment network can lead to the mobilisation of less politically active individuals, with a mobilisation effect occurring only if these users hold a minimum level of political engagement. As per Verba et al.'s (1995) theorisation, political engagement is considered in this thesis as citizens' psychological predisposition towards politics and encompasses five linked but different components: political interest, political knowledge, internal and external political efficacy, and partisanship (see Section 2.1.2 for the definitions of these terms and literature examining the ways in which they are linked to political participation). Political interest is the measure presenting the strongest links with Facebook political participation, with data strongly suggesting that politically interested individuals are the ones who employ Facebook the most for political purposes (see Section 5.3.2). In addition, considering that the general pattern established by research is that political interest increases with age (Holt et al., 2013; Mascherini et al., 2009; Putnam, 2000), the relationship between age and political participation which surfaced in the present investigation (see Section 5.3.1) could also be explained with reference to this factor. Partisanship, political knowledge, internal and external political efficacy also mediate the contributions of Facebook to political participation. As highlighted in Section 5.3.2, among these measures, data suggested that political knowledge and partisanship impact the most on Facebook political participation. Internal political efficacy appeared to be dependent, at least in part, on levels of political knowledge, while external efficacy in particular seemed relevant mainly to more resource-expensive political activities, such as participating in political initiatives. The final factor to be considered is party affiliation, which is not part of Verba et al.'s (1995) conceptualisation of political engagement, but is related to partisanship. Party affiliation has surfaced as an important factor in the IS, given the presence within the Italian political scenario of a

political party like the M5S which employs the Internet as its main organisational and communication tool and whose supporters are particularly active on SNSs (see Section 6.1).

Considerations of the Italian and British political scenarios lead to a fourth cluster within PMFPP, that of the contextual factors. As recognised by the model's creators, Verba et al. (1995), the CVM can only provide a partial account of political participation, a phenomenon which is influenced by myriad other factors and motives that are not included in this theorisation. As evident in Figure 26, the present research goes beyond such a model and includes two other clusters of factors: contextual factors and Facebook usage. With respect to the contextual factors cluster, the presence of two different spheres becomes apparent: the media sphere and the political sphere. The political sphere encompasses three elements. One, as said, is the presence of political forces – not necessarily parties – employing Facebook extensively for both campaigning and communication purposes, whose supporters demonstrate high levels of online political activity. As it appeared in the cases of M5S in the IS and 38 Degrees in the BS (see Section 5.3.2), individuals supporting parties or movements that are particularly active on Facebook are more likely to engage politically through this SNS.

Another factor related to the political scenarios is the proximity of electoral periods in that, as explained in Section 6.5, citizens and political parties' political activity escalates closer to elections. It would be possible to reason that proximity to elections impacts on political participation by increasing the amount of recruitment requests, the levels of partisanship and political interest.

The third politically-related factor is the degree of political disenchantment. Research attests to the widespread detachment from traditional political institutions in both Italy and the UK (Curran et al. 2014; Donovan and Onofri 2008; Hansard Society 2013, 2014). This has been confirmed in this thesis, in particular with respect to the IS. The findings of the present study suggest that political disenchantment can impact on Facebook political participation in several ways. Firstly, political disenchantment can result in decreased levels of participation in activities falling within the mobilisation dimension. This clearly surfaced in both samples, with participants often doubting the efficacy of political initiatives and expressing scepticism towards the responsiveness to such activities by the political establishment (see Section 5.2.1), an issue strongly linked to the external political efficacy construct. However, political disenchantment can also have a positive effect on Facebook political participation. In fact, it can push citizens closer to anti-establishment protest movements – as the M5S was in its

early form – that are highly reliant on online platforms such as Facebook to engage disenchanted and demobilised citizens. Furthermore, the disengagement from traditional and institutionalised forms of participation can lead to the new and unconventional participatory practices (Norris' – 2002 – *democratic phoenix*) and to the rise of lifestyle politics for which Facebook appears particularly suitable, as stressed in Section 6.2.

Alongside the political sphere, the contextual factors cluster also includes four media-related components. One is the penetration of other online platforms such as Twitter, which in this thesis was identified as one of the possible reasons behind the participatory gap between the IS and the BS (see Section 6.1). In this regard, IPs' online political participation is concentrated on Facebook, whereas BPs' participation is diluted across a series of additional online platforms. Another relevant component of the contextual factors cluster is media usage. Media usage is shaped by people's perception of mainstream media which, in turn, is influenced by a country's media system. This issue is thoroughly analysed in Section 6.1 which explains that IPs' higher levels of Facebook activity, both political and non-political, could be in part attributed to the fact that some Italians rely more on the Internet as an information source than their British counterparts, a practice linked to their negative perception of mainstream media due to the high political parallelism typical of the Italian media system.

Elements of the media scenario such as the penetration of other online platforms and the perception of traditional media are linked to the fourth cluster of the PMFPP, that of Facebook usage. This cluster embraces seven components: time spent on Facebook, perception of Facebook, relevance of Facebook in one's life, self-presentation, the semi-public setting of Facebook, privacy concerns, and the heterogeneity of the Facebook network. The first three components are closely interrelated and influenced by the media scenario. Data showed that participants' Facebook political participation is connected to the perception they have of the platform, a finding that confirms the findings of Weinstein (2014), Lupia and Philpot (2005) and Gillan (2008), who all establish that the adoption of a technology and the ways people use it are determined by the attitudes and perceptions they hold towards it. This appears, for instance, in the case of Lesley, who displayed limited levels of Facebook political participation and considered Facebook a time-waster (see her quote at p. 167). The opposite occurs for Giuliano who employs Facebook extensively for political purposes and values such a platform because he sees it as free from the control of the political elites. In the case of Giuliano, it is evident that the perception of Facebook can be influenced by how individuals view traditional media, something clearly noticeable in the

IS (see quotes at p. 143). The relevance of the perception of Facebook for political participation carried out on this SNS can be explained through Parasuraman's (2000) construct of *technology readiness*, which refers to the propensity to use technology in order to pursue certain goals in day-to-day life or at work. This construct is formed by four components: optimism and innovativeness (i.e., contributors), and discomfort and insecurity (i.e., inhibitors). Optimism denotes a positive perception of a technology because of its ability to offer increased control, flexibility and efficiency. Innovativeness indicates an individual's tendency to be a technology pioneer. Discomfort is a perceived lack of control over a certain form of technology which leads to feelings of being overwhelmed by it, while insecurity refers to feelings of distrust towards a form of technology and scepticism about its ability to function (Parasuraman 2000).

Related to the perception of Facebook is the relevance that this SNS has in one's life which, as shown by both quantitative and qualitative data (see Section 5.3.3), also impacts on the likelihood of participating politically on this SNS. The relevance of Facebook is linked to the penetration of other online platforms, and can help to explain the differences in Facebook political participation between the two samples, with IPs often replacing many other online tools with this SNS (see Section 5.1.1). The links between the relevance of Facebook and political participation can be explained through Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur's (1976) Media System Dependency Theory according to which the more that individuals rely on media to meet their needs (e.g., surveillance, social utility, and fantasy-escape), the more important media will be in their lives and the greater the effects that media will produce on them.

Relevance and perception of Facebook are connected to another item of the Facebook usage cluster, i.e., the time users spend on the platform. Time spent on Facebook is a key factor, particularly for individuals displaying limited levels of political participation who can be accidentally exposed to political information while navigating the website (see Section 5.2.2). In light of a conceptual weakness of many Internet and political participation studies (i.e., the overgeneralisation of Internet and SNS usage), the present investigation attempted to clarify whether the contributions of Facebook to political participation vary according to different usage practices. Research suggests that individuals employ this SNS for a number of reasons, e.g., to keep in touch with friends and family, to relieve boredom, to find information or seek advice, for game-playing/entertainment (Mitchell et al. 2013; Lampe et al. 2008). These findings are confirmed in the present study in which Facebook emerged as an all-encompassing platform through which participants engage in a wide array of activities ranging from communication and entertainment to information and work related activities

(see Section 5.3.3). Interestingly, the present research indicated that rather than the ways people use this SNS, it is the time they spend on it that matters the most in terms of political participation because simply by being on Facebook, users can be exposed to political information and requests for participation through either the News Feed or direct messages/posts.

The other components of the Facebook usage cluster were discussed in Section 6.2, which highlighted how privacy concerns and dynamics related to users' self-presentation can affect both political and non-political Facebook usage, with participants resorting to private messages, creation of alternative profiles, and even self-censorship in order to avoid disapproval and present their hoped-for identities. In this sense, the composition of users' Facebook network and the semi-public setting of Facebook are crucial, with the presence of politically heterogeneous contacts having, in certain cases, a restraining effect on political participation (see Section 5.1.2). With regards to privacy concerns, data indicated that participants worry about both social and institutional privacy (Raynes-Goldie 2010). The social side of privacy refers to individuals' control over their personal information which is undermined by the semi-public setting of Facebook and the condensed audience typical of this environment. In contrast, institutional privacy concerns relate to the usage of personal data by corporations such as Facebook, and, as the case of Lesley shows (see her quote at p. 122), they are connected to how this SNS is perceived (i.e., a company profiting from the exploitation of users' information) and can limit the levels of Facebook activity. Vitak (2012) and Vitak and Ellison (2012) confirm the value of what was established in the present research and show that, due to privacy concerns, users can end up limiting their onsite activity and connections with friends, and the presence of certain individuals or groups within their network can lead them to censor updates or use alternative channels.

A useful theoretical framework which explains the links between the components of the Facebook usage cluster and Facebook political participation is Venkatesh et al.'s (2003) Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology. According to this theory, the likelihood of adopting and employing a new form of technology depends on four core determinants: performance expectancy, which refers to the expected benefits of the usage of a technology; effort expectancy, namely the expected ease of use of a new technology; facilitating conditions, which concern the perceived availability of resources and support for a particular use of the technology; and social influence, which indicate users' perception of how significant others (e.g., family and friends) believe they should use the technology. In the context of the PMFPP, performance expectancy, expected benefits, and facilitating

conditions are elements related to and shaping the perception of Facebook, while social influence is connected to users' self-presentation. Borrero et al. (2014) test the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology and Parasuraman's (2000) technology readiness construct on SNSs. They confirm that technology readiness, effort expectancy, social influence, and performance expectancy significantly influence students' intentions to adopt SNSs for expressive participation, a form of participation entailing the public expression of social orientations (Puig-i-Abril and Rojas 2007) in online social movements (Borrero et al. 2014). Similar findings are produced by Weinstein (2014), who establishes that expression on SNSs is conditioned by organisational policies, personal image and privacy, perceived alignment with civic goals, attitudes toward the platform(s), and perceptions of audience(s). The results of these studies show the value of the Social-psychological model of political participation presented in Section 2.1.2, according to which political behaviour can be explained in terms of expected benefits and social norms (Fishbein 1967; Muller 1979).

Finally, the last cluster forming the PMFPP is Internet and offline political participation, which has a direct or indirect relationship with all the other components of the model. From both the quantitative and qualitative results (see Section 5.1.1) of the present study it appears that the most important predictor of Facebook political participation is political participation itself, both on the Internet and offline. In this sense, as stressed in Section 6.4, this thesis strongly supports the normalisers' stance and suggests that, in terms of political participation, Facebook contributes the most to individuals who are already politically active.

Taking into consideration previous models of political participation and the findings from the present research, the PMFPP has been developed in this section. This model encompasses six clusters of factors, i.e., resources, recruitment requests, political engagement, Facebook usage, contextual factors, and Internet and offline political participation, and 25 sub-components, i.e., time, digital skills, network size, political network, interaction with political network, political interest, political knowledge, internal political efficacy, external political efficacy, partisanship, party affiliation, political disenchantment, proximity of electoral periods, media systems, perception of mainstream media, media usage, penetration of other online platforms, perception of Facebook, relevance of Facebook in one's life, time spent on Facebook, privacy concerns, political heterogeneity of Facebook network, the semi-public nature of the Facebook setting, and self-presentation. This model is "particularised" in the sense that numerous elements coming

from a wide array of different but interlinked spheres have been considered in its development. However, despite its span, the PMFPP can by no means be considered a conclusive one as it is based on factors arising out of the data of the present study, and shaped by the pursued lines of enquiry. In doing so, it has excluded a number of factors, such as incentives or specific usages (e.g., information vs entertainment) of other media like TV or radio, although research has indicated their relevance for political participation (see Section 2.1.2). Nonetheless, the PMFPP remains a detailed, thorough and original account of this highly contingent phenomenon and certainly sheds light on the links between Facebook and political participation.

6.7 Limitations and Further Research

The author is confident of the academic rigour of the present study and the value and novelty of its findings. Nonetheless, there are a series of limitations that need to be acknowledged and addressed. Such limitations range from issues related to the sampling strategy and the cross-national comparative approach to certain choices made in the design and the development of the study, such as the items and variables included in, or rather excluded from, the survey, and the lines of enquiry pursued in the interviews.

Starting with the sampling strategy, as explained in Section 4.4.3, the original plan was to employ probability sampling in the first quantitative phase of the study and purposive sampling in the following qualitative phase. The adoption of probability sampling would have increased the likelihood of obtaining representative samples of the British and Italian Facebook populations and, consequently, the generalisability of the results. However, for the reasons explained in Section 4.4.3, it was not possible to implement random sampling, and snowball sampling was chosen instead. This could have lead to an error of coverage, which manifests when there is a difference between the target population and the sampling frame in that some segments of the population are systematically excluded from the sample (Fricker 2008). In order to limit such an error the sample sizes were calculated taking into account the sizes of the British and Italian Facebook population, confidence intervals were applied, and the samples obtained were post-stratified so that they mirrored the respective Facebook populations in terms of age (see Section 4.5). These counter-measures were adopted to try to increase the representativeness of the samples, but even so the generalisability that random samples would have guaranteed could not be achieved.

As explained, snowball-sampling was employed. The principal downside of this sampling technique is sample bias where individuals with larger networks are oversampled whereas more isolated participants tend to be excluded (Heckathorn 1997). Another possible problem with snowball-sampling is that participants may misinterpret the purpose and design of the study and recruit inappropriate volunteers (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). In order to avoid these two possible issues the author directly targeted participants in order to guarantee a certain degree of variation in terms of demographics and levels of Facebook and political activity, provided them with clear instructions to which type of people the questionnaire should have been forwarded to. Furthermore, information on the eligibility criteria and the purpose of the study were inserted at the beginning of the questionnaires, and a micro-site where participants could obtain more in-depth information about the research was created (see the questionnaires in Appendix E).

The value of having more representative samples certainly has to be acknowledged. However, it could be argued that for the purpose of the present research, random samples are desirable but not necessary. This study was, in fact, exploratory in nature, and did not aim to generalise its findings, but rather it attempted to generate and test theories. Representative samples would have offered a more robust base for the development of the theories, but by no means does the value and rigour of the present study rest on the random nature of the samples. In addition, it has to be noted that this is a MM study which combined interviews with questionnaires and was not based exclusively on quantitative data. The first quantitative phase did not assume priority and its goal was to determine the relationships between the considered variables and indicate trends to be further explored and examined in greater depth in the interviews (see Section 4.4). In light of these considerations, the adoption of non-random samples in the quantitative phase has to be regarded only as a minor limitation.

The recruitment of the two quantitative samples through a non-random procedure creates an issue also in terms of the comparability of the samples' scores. In this regard, Lynn et al. (2007) stress that, to enable comparison between nations, sample designs for cross-national surveys must meet two fundamental criteria: first, probability sampling must be used; second, there must be equivalence in the studied populations of each nation. As mentioned before, despite various attempts, the first condition could not be satisfied and non-random samples were used. This, however, did not impact excessively on the present research given its aims. Concerning the second condition, in pursuit of samples' equivalence, methodological standardisation was sought. Attention was devoted to guaranteeing

equivalence in sample selection and recruitment (see Sections 4.4.3 and 4.5), and data collection methods and measurement procedures (see Sections 4.4.3 and 4.6).

Nonetheless, given the non-probabilistic nature of snowball sampling, discrepancies in the samples' demographic compositions could not be avoided (see Appendix C). While the two samples are very similar in terms of the age composition due to the applied post-stratification procedure, the BS presents a higher percentage of females than the IS and higher levels of education and occupation. As explained in Section 5.3.1, such a gender gap could be one of the reasons behind the samples' differences in Facebook political participation, with IPs slightly more active than BPs. Research has, in fact, established that males are traditionally more politically active than females (Atkeson and Rapoport 2003; Burns et al. 1997; Coonway 2001), a trend which surfaced in the quantitative data of the present study, but only in the BS. Considering the quantitative results, the non-equivalence of the samples in terms of gender could have contributed to the samples' participatory gap and therefore has to be seen as a limitation because it did not enable an optimal comparison of the samples' scores. Qualitative results, however, reversed this picture. In line with Bengtsson and Christensen (2012), who find that women outweigh men in their sample of Internet activists, and suggest that the Internet may help to even out the gender gap found in numerous studies of political participation (e.g., Norris 2002; Verba et al. 1995), the qualitative results of the present research discarded the relevance of gender for Facebook political participation and indicated alternative explanations for the samples' participatory gap (e.g., negative perception of traditional media, self-presentation, etc.). Taking into account the qualitative findings, as for the usage of random sampling, the non-equivalence of the samples is only a minor limitation of this research and its impact on the results is limited.

Also related to the comparability of the samples' scores is the issue of *response styles*. Van Herk et al. (2004) warn that in cross-cultural surveys, scores of rating scales are often compared at face value, without considering response styles like acquiescence and extreme response. Van Herk et al. (2004) examine response styles in six countries (i.e., Greece, Italy, Spain, France, Germany, and the UK) and establish that acquiescence and extreme response are more present in the Mediterranean than in North-Western Europe, findings confirmed also by Harzing (2006) in a larger study focusing on 26 countries. This could suggest that in the present investigation the differences in scores between the two samples could be affected by Italians' propensity towards extreme responses. This possibility has to be rejected, as qualitative results confirm what was established in the surveys, namely IPs' higher political

usage of Facebook, and indicate a series of possible explanations which exclude the impact of response styles on the results.

Hence in terms of sampling strategy and comparability of results, no major limitations can be found in this study. On the other hand, certain choices made in the design and the developments of the research have proved to be more problematic. The first doubtful choice was that of not measuring the size of participants' Facebook network in the survey. Such a choice appears even less understandable since Ellison et al.'s (2007) Facebook intensity scale, from which the Facebook perceived relevance scale has been drawn (see Section 4.6.1), includes an item to assess the size of the Facebook network. The decision to exclude this item from the questionnaire was taken after the piloting of the surveys, as several participants commented on their excessive length. Aiming to simplify the online questionnaire to boost response rate, the author decided to exclude a number of survey items, among which was the question assessing network size. Such a choice was questionable, considering also what emerged in the review of the literature with regards to relevance of network size for political participation (see Section 2.1.2). Conveniently, the combination of a qualitative phase to the quantitative one enabled the author to remedy this misjudgement and explore the links between network size and Facebook political participation through the interviews.

Whereas for the size of the Facebook network, imprecisions in the surveys were rectified in the qualitative phase, the same did not happen for party affiliation. As explained in Section 5.3.2, data did not offer a clear picture of how affiliation to a specific political party can mediate contributions of Facebook to political participation, with the only exception found in relation to the M5S. This unclear picture is linked to the lines of enquiry pursued in this study. In the initial stages of study design, the author specifically decided to assume a bottom-up approach, focusing on how citizens can employ Facebook for political purposes outside electoral periods, rather than examining how political parties can take advantage of this online platform. In doing so, party affiliation was deemed a secondary variable. Its links with Facebook political participation were not explored in the interviews, while it was inserted in the survey only to assess the amount of participants who did not consider themselves affiliated to any political party or movement, as an indication of the samples' levels of political disenchantment. The focus was, therefore, on the non-affiliation rather than on the allegiance to a party or movement.

However, from the interview with Giuliano, an activist of the M5S, it clearly appeared that affiliation to this party can affect Facebook political participation, which shows the worth of considering party affiliation when examining the contributions of this SNS to citizens' political participation. In the light of this finding, it would have been interesting to assess the relationship between Facebook political participation and the affiliation to a party like the SNP, which in the context of the 2011 Scottish Election had the greatest online presence and the largest following on social media (Baxter and Marcella 2013), a trend confirmed also in the recent Scottish Independence Referendum. Unfortunately, it was not possible to test such a relationship through the quantitative data, given the way party affiliation was operationalised in the survey. Participants were provided with a list of three parties they could choose from (considering the results from the previous Italian and British general elections, the top three parties in terms of votes were chosen) plus an "Other" and a "No Affiliation" options (see Section 4.6.1). The possibility to specify a party was not offered to participants selecting the "Other" option. This turned out to be a mistake as 25% of the BPs and 27% of IPs chose this option and their party affiliation could not be established. While for the M5S, the interview with an activist highlighted the relevance of the affiliation to this movement/party for Facebook political participation, no interviews were held with supporters of the SNP, which is questionable also considering that the present research was carried out in Scotland, and qualitative data were not able to rectify this oversight. Taking into account such a limitation, which is probably the major one of the present study, it would be interesting to replicate this research during electoral periods – the 2016 Scottish Parliament general election, for instance, would provide the perfect scenario for such an exercise – and specifically address the links between party affiliation and political participation on SNSs.

The findings this thesis also suggests a number of possible venues to pursue which would further the development of the field. Considering the conceptual weaknesses characterising Internet and political participation research (see Section 4.1), this study distinguished between political communication and mobilisation and assessed if the contributions of Facebook can vary in relation to these two different arrays of political activities. Future studies could distinguish, instead, between institutionalised forms of political participation and individualised lifestyle oriented political activities, or between locally and nationally oriented political participation. While in this thesis the tendency of SNSs to support lifestyle politics have been addressed (see Section 6.2), even if in a limited capacity, the local/national distinction has been ignored despite qualitative results suggesting that

Facebook is particularly effective when it operates in support of offline-based entities operating at the local level (see Section 5.2.1). This was a conscious choice necessitated by the complexity of the study. Through a MM approach and a cross-national comparative lens the present research dealt with a wide array of issues: it looked at the links between Facebook, Internet and offline political participation, focused on the communication/mobilisation distinction, specifically considering activism, political discussion, and consumption of political information, and assessed how different Facebook usage practices can affect political participation on this SNS. Considering the intricacy of this project, adding other variables and distinguishing between local and national political participation would not have been feasible.

Finally, this study could be criticised because, despite being a cross-national comparative one, it has focused very much on the individual level and has not looked at how, for instance, culture can affect Facebook political participation. Moy et al. (2012) and Reyfe (2001) observe that political communication research is often characterised by methodological individualism, ignoring the fact that political communication is cultural as well as attitudinal. This trend is possibly linked to difficulties in operationalising something as fuzzy as culture, and the resources required to assess its influence on behaviours and attitudes. In *Modernization and Postmodernization*, Inglehart (1997) highlights, for example, how political participation is strictly linked to culture. Inglehart (1997) observes that industrialisation leads to changes such as mass mobilisation and diminishing differences in gender roles, and theorises that economic development, cultural change, and political change are interlinked and follow, to some extent, predictable patterns, “a trajectory that is generally called Modernization” (p.7). It could be argued that Inglehart (1997) was able to develop such a comprehensive theory thanks to the vast data set provided by World Values Surveys, which covered approximately 60,000 participants in 43 countries, mirroring 70% of the world’s population. However, not every study can count on such an impressive data set and with smaller samples caution must be applied as findings might not be transferable to larger populations. Considerations of the sampling strategy and methodology adopted in the present study have guided the choice of focusing on the individual level. As explained before, non-random sampling has not proven problematic in the context of this research given its exploratory nature. However, it would have been an issue if the research attempted to attribute differences in the samples’ scores to cultural factors on the basis of approximately 400 questionnaires and 24 interviews with non-random and non-representative samples.

Where possible, differences in the samples have been explained with reference to the national context. As per Section 6.1, the samples' participatory gap on Facebook was ascribed to the contrasting media and political landscapes of Italy and the UK, a line of argument possible to develop because of the great deal of research dealing with these issues. In contrast, the stronger restraining effect of privacy concerns and political heterogeneity of the Facebook network on Facebook political participation observed in the BS was not linked to cultural characteristics of the British and Italian populations. It would be interesting to explore this relationship, considering the substantial lack of research examining privacy and self-presentation from a cross-national perspective. To date, the great majority of studies examining self-presentation and communicative practices on SNSs are uni-cultural. Those investigations assuming a cross-national and cross-cultural perspective often focus on the individualism/collectivism dichotomy theorised by Hofstede (1980) and, comparing Western and Asian countries, demonstrate that online self-presentation is sensitive to national culture (Doherty and Schlenker 1991; Gudykunst et al. 1987, 1996; Kim and Papacharissi 2003; Rui and Stefanone 2013; Yoo et al. 2014; Zhao and Jiang 2011). Gudykunst et al. (1987) stress that members of individualistic cultures value personal achievement more than members of collectivistic ones, and are characterised by higher public self-consciousness, i.e., the awareness of the self in relation to others (Fenigstein et al. 1980), an element which impacts on their communicative strategies and practices. Because they are more concerned about the influence of negative comments on their images, they engage in strategic self-presentation more often than members of collectivist cultures in order to maintain positive self-images (Doherty and Schlenker 1991). These findings are confirmed by Rui and Stefanone (2013), also with respect to SNSs, and other cross-national studies which highlight the links between national culture, the individualism/collectivism dimension, privacy concerns and self-disclosure (Bellman et al. 2004; Miltgen and Peyrat-Guillard 2014; Posey et al. 2010). Hofstede's approach is not flawless (see McSweeney – 2002 – for a critique, and Hofstede – 2002 – for a response) but his framework, in particular the individualism/collectivism dimension, could potentially elucidate the links between political participation and self-presentation in digital settings. Applying this framework to Internet and political participation research would be a novelty, perhaps an interesting avenue to pursue in the future, as it is something that has thus far not been done, despite the staggering number of studies falling within this strand of research.

7 CONCLUSIONS

Drawing from an extensive and unique data set acquired by combining a cross-national comparative approach and a MM methodology, this thesis examines the contributions of Facebook to citizens' political participation in Italy and the UK. As such, citizens rather than political institutions are the focus of the present research.

As highlighted in Chapter 3, there has been a proliferation in the last decade of academic studies investigating the links between digital technologies and citizens' political participation. The present study differs from other investigations in this area in three ways. Firstly, the majority of research focuses heavily on the campaign environment (e.g., Bimber and Davis 2003; Curtice and Norris 2008; Davis et al. 2009; Dimitrova et al. 2014; Rice et al. 2013). The data for this study were gathered mostly in a non-electoral period and thus the contributions of Facebook to citizens' political participation were assessed independently of the electoral process, which usually sees a rise in political participation (see Sections 4.3 and 4.4.3). Secondly, two conceptual weaknesses characterising many Internet and political participation studies were identified: the failure to consider political participation as a multidimensional phenomenon and an over-generalised approach to Internet and SNS usages (see Section 4.1). Intending to determine whether the contributions of Facebook vary in relation to different political activities or usage practices, the present study has tackled the two identified weaknesses by distinguishing between political mobilisation and political communication activities, and between three Facebook non-political usages, i.e., information, interpersonal communication, and social recreation. Finally, in response to the lack of cross-national comparative studies in this subject area (see Section 4.2), the contributions of Facebook to citizens' political participation were examined in the different contexts of Italy and the United Kingdom. The comparative element proved particularly useful as it enabled the identification of contextual conditions prompting variations in political participation, and shed light on more general determinants of this complex phenomenon.

This research makes four main contributions to the field of political communication, and more specifically to the strand of research examining the impact of digital technologies on political participation. The first contribution is the Particularised Model of Facebook Political Participation (PMFPP) which illustrates the various factors mediating the links between Facebook and political participation in the contexts of Italy and the UK. Secondly, the present study sheds light on the ways that Facebook functions as a political platform and

highlights that dynamics typical of both new and traditional media are in action on this SNS. The third contribution is the Dual Routes of Exposure Model (DREM) which offers clarification on the alleged tendency of digital technologies to promote selective exposure and, consequently, political fragmentation and polarisation. Finally, the present study also highlights the sterility of the debate between optimists, normalisers, and pessimists, cutting through the polarised evidence to indicate potentially fruitful approaches which could further the development of the field of Internet and political participation research.

The PMFPP can be considered the end product of this research, and is arguably the most original and valuable contribution of the four outlined above. The adoption of a cross-national approach, which highlighted the relevance of context, and implementation of a MM methodology, which enabled the identification of a series of factors promoting and inhibiting political participation, as well as enabling the investigation of the dynamics of such a phenomenon in the Facebook environment, have proved instrumental to the development of this explanatory model. After consideration of a great deal of academic literature, it is safe to claim that the PMFPP is the first model of Facebook political participation developed thus far. It encompasses six clusters of factors affecting political participation on this SNS – resources, recruitment requests, political engagement, Facebook usage, contextual factors, and Internet and offline political participation – and comprises a total of 25 components (see Figure 26 in Section 6.6). Resources, political engagement, and recruitment requests have already been accounted for in other political participation models (see Verba et al.'s – 1995 – CVM in Section 2.2.1). Similarly, the strong links between offline and online political participation have been highlighted by numerous studies (see the studies supporting the normalisers' stance in Section 3.1). In the PMFPP, these factors are combined with numerous others falling within the contextual factors and Facebook usage clusters.

Political participation has thus emerged in this thesis as a complex phenomenon which can be shaped by a myriad of factors ranging from external, context-related ones such as media and political landscapes, to more personal, subjective ones such as self-presentation, pre-existing levels of political engagement, and the nature and size of the Facebook network. In relation to the latter group of factors, much of the research has examined the links between political participation and political engagement, resources and recruitment network (see Section 2.1.2), whereas less attention has been given to how self-presentation can influence political participation. Recently, an increasing number of investigations have focused on such a topic. The present study complements research in this area (Gustafsson 2012; Storsul 2014; Thorson 2014; Vromen et al. 2015; Weinstein 2014) and, in line with existing

empirical evidence, shows that the dynamics of self-presentation have an impact on political participation on SNSs. This thesis not only determines that self-presentation needs to be taken into account when examining political participation on Facebook, which can be described as a *digital front stage* (Marichal, 2013), but it also demonstrates that self-presentation is a highly important factor in determining users' likelihood of engaging in political activity through such a platform. In fact, as discussed in Section 6.2, the participatory gap between the samples in the present research (i.e., IPs are more politically active than BPs particularly on Facebook) can be, in part, ascribed to the stronger restraining effect that the semi-public nature of this SNS and the associated privacy concerns had on BPs' Facebook political participation. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, it was not possible to establish if this finding relates only to the considered samples or is linked to differences in the British and Italian cultures. In this sense, the potential links between self-presentation and culture could be an interesting point to explore in future research (see Section 6.7).

With respect to the contextual factors cluster, this thesis confirms the relevance of three contextual variables identified by Anduiza et al. (2012) as mediators of the relationship between digital media and political participation: digital divides, media systems, and institutional settings. Besides attesting to the relevance of these three variables for Facebook political participation, the present study also sheds light on the process by which they can influence the likelihood of participating politically through Facebook in the specific contexts of Italy and the UK (see Section 6.1). As such, the study makes the argument that the differences between the samples in terms of political participation can be, to some extent, attributed to three main contextual factors linked to the two countries' different media and political landscapes. The first is the penetration and diffusion in the UK of other online platforms such as Twitter, with BPs often employing such platforms in conjunction with or as an alternative to Facebook, whereas Facebook is by far the most dominant SNS in the IS. The second factor is IPs' more negative perception of mainstream media, particularly TV, which has pushed them to seek alternative political information sources and which is arguably linked to the high levels of political parallelism characterising the Italian media system, and also to what has been described in this thesis as the *Berlusconi anomaly*. The third factor regards the political scenario and is the presence in Italy of the M5S, a political party which is highly reliant upon online platforms like Facebook to engage disenchanted and demobilised citizens, and whose supporters characterise themselves for their high levels of online political activity.

The value of the PMFPP rests on the integration of personal, subjective factors (e.g., self-presentation, political engagement, etc.) with external, context-related ones (e.g., media and political scenario). It therefore highlights that the contributions of digital technologies must be analysed in context, within the larger patterns they fit into, and cannot be examined in isolation. From this thesis, it becomes clear that the contributions of Facebook to political participation are better understood if considered within the *hybrid media system* in which this SNS operates (see Section 6.5). This study stresses that Facebook remains a niche (i.e., Facebook divide). This SNS is just one tool in the extensive and diverse political arsenal available to citizens, and perhaps the most effective way in which it can aid political participation is in bridging the online/offline divide, integrating and supporting other media and offline activities.

Similarly, Facebook cannot be considered in total isolation from the political scenarios in which citizens operate. The intent of this thesis was to study how Facebook can contribute to citizens' political participation beyond the electoral process, focusing exclusively on citizens and, somewhat naively, putting aside political institutions. Despite attempting to do so, political parties nonetheless entered into the picture. This suggests that, regardless of the rise of *lifestyle politics* (Bennett 1998), political institutions are still at the centre of the political process. Therefore, the ways citizens employ online technologies to participate politically and the ways political institutions use these tools to engage with citizens are two sides of the same coin, and both have to be taken into consideration for the development of a thorough account of the contributions of Facebook to political participation.

Despite its span, the PMFPP can by no means be considered a conclusive model, due to the complexity and contingent nature of political participation. Nonetheless, it provides a detailed, thorough and original account of the links between Facebook and political participation. Such a model could be expanded by analysing the contributions of Facebook to political participation in other national contexts, in order to identify additional contextual factors intervening in this equation. The PMFPP has been developed through an exploratory approach that, drawing on results obtained from purposive samples, enabled the researcher to probe into the links between Facebook political participation and a wide number of variables. It would be interesting to test the generalisability of the model by replicating this study with representative samples of the British and Italian Facebook populations. Representativeness is an issue typical of Facebook-drawn samples (Bhutta 2012), but Gjoka et al. (2010) shows that through the application of an advanced crawling technique it is possible to obtain a representative sample of Facebook users. The usage of representative

samples would not only enable the testing of the generality of the PMFPP, but could also be employed to look at how culture can impact on Facebook political participation, further enhancing the model (see Section 6.7 for a more detailed discussion of the limitations of the present study and venues of further research).

This thesis offers a second contribution to the field in considering the ways Facebook operates as a political platform. Research has shown the relevance of this SNS as a political tool (see Sections 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4). The present study goes a step further and sheds light on the processes of political participation on this SNS. In this regard, it establishes that dynamics typical of both new and traditional media are in action on this SNS (see Section 6.5). Pedroni et al. (2014) note that Facebook exhibits features surprisingly consistent with mass media models, in terms of passivity, content production and content consumption. The present research substantiates this claim and highlights its consequences for political participation. It indicates that certain features of Facebook can restrict the users' control over transmission and consumption of content, thus inhibiting the freedom typically granted to audiences by new media. Facebook activity occurs on two main pages: the Wall and the News Feed (Caers et al. 2013). Due to newly implemented privacy settings, users have a lot of control over their Wall, but they exercise less control over the News Feed which updates them on the activities of their network (e.g., likes, groups joined, status updates, etc.). The presence of the News Feed partially limits users' control over the distribution of content, enabling Facebook to operate as a broadcasting platform, generating and disseminating customised news stories. As discussed in Section 6.4, the present research demonstrates that this broadcasting aspect has important implications for political participation, particularly for users characterised by limited levels of political activity who can be exposed through the News Feed, often accidentally, to political information. Such a process can activate a *virtuous circle*, which can eventually lead to engagement in other forms of political participation.

In contrast to the negative narratives promoted by the advocates of the rich-get-richer hypothesis (e.g., Bimber 2001, 2003; Bonfadelli 2002; Schlozman et al. 2010; Weber et al. 2003), the present study re-evaluates the presence of a dominant minority of politically active citizens and, adding to existing empirical evidence, illustrates that what emerged in relation to mass media and other digital technologies in Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) Two-Step Flow of Communication Model, Graham and Wright's (2014) account of superparticipation in online discussion forums, and Hamilton and Tolbert's (2012) accidental mobilisation, is even more evident in the Facebook environment due to the way the News

Feed functions. It suggests, then, that politically active Facebook users can operate as *participation intermediaries* and foster the participation of citizens with limited levels of participation by exposing them to their political activities, often through the News Feed.

The broadcasting character of the News Feed has important repercussions also for the scholarly dispute on the alleged potential of digital media to promote selective exposure, political fragmentation and polarisation (see Sections 3.2 and 3.3). The present research helps to clarify matters through the development of the DREM, which can be considered the third main contribution of this thesis. As discussed in detail in Section 6.3, the DREM explains how political information can be consumed in the Facebook environment and illustrates that exposure to political information can occur on this SNS through two routes: the direct route and the accidental route. In the direct route, users have control over the flow of information and actively select information according to personal preferences, interests and habits. Facebook users can therefore choose to follow a certain page or news outlet, in this way making a conscious choice and operating proactively, a distinctive characteristic of new (i.e., pull) media audiences. On the other hand, in the accidental route users are passively, and sometimes inadvertently, exposed to information through the News Feed, in line with the broadcasting model of communication which typifies traditional media. Given that the active role of the audience in content selection and consumption is a necessary condition for the occurrence of selective exposure (Dutta-Bergman and Chung 2005), this thesis makes the argument that, as a result of the broadcasting function of the News Feed, Facebook can counteract selective exposure and operate as a potential antidote against political fragmentation and polarisation. This, however, does not mean that Facebook is immune to selective exposure. Accidental exposure is, in fact, only one component of the information consumption process, and most Facebook users still consume politically contiguous information and engage in discussion with like-minded individuals.

The fourth contribution of the present research is to help clear up the debate between Internet optimists, normalisers, and pessimists presented in Section 3.1. This study provides evidence in support of both the reinforcement and mobilisation hypotheses, while discarding the pessimistic stance. It finds that Facebook can further increase the political activity of politically active citizens by offering additional venues of participation. At the same time, it shows that this SNS can aid users with limited levels of political participation by reducing the thresholds of participation and expanding their recruitment networks, consequently exposing them to more political information and participation opportunities. Furthermore, distinguishing between political mobilisation and communication, the present research

determines that the contributions of Facebook to political participation vary in relation to the different types of political activity undertaken. Politically active participants are those who take more advantage of the mobilisation affordances of Facebook, whereas less politically active participants employ this SNS mainly as a communicative and informative political tool (see Section 6.4).

This study complements the work of other researchers who also find that digital technologies can have dual effects on political participation, supporting both the reinforcement and mobilisation positions (e.g., Bimber et al., 2014; Gibson and Cantijoch 2013; Mascheroni 2012; Hargittai and Shaw 2013; Nam 2012; Oser et al. 2013). Like these studies, the present research considers the multidimensionality of political participation and distinguishes between different participatory modes. By doing so, it tackles a conceptual weakness typical in Internet and political participation studies (see Section 4.1), and highlights the restrictiveness and sterility of the dispute between optimists, normalisers, and pessimists. Hence this thesis adds to an existing commentary, refining it through an in-depth theoretical discussion grounded on a unique set of data generated through an innovative approach combining cross-national research to a MM methodology.

The present research confirms that the effects of digital technologies on political participation are manifold – reinforcement does not exclude mobilisation and vice versa – and must be assessed as part of a continuum, rather than being considered in neat, mutually exclusive categories. Therefore, this thesis demonstrates beyond doubt that the polarised approach which typifies the debate between optimists, normalisers, and pessimists is far too narrow to provide a thorough account of the links between digital technologies and citizens' political participation. In this sense, to allow for development in this area of research, it would be beneficial – as done in this thesis – to adopt a more particularised approach, which offers further discriminatory power by taking into account the differences between the various Internet tools, types of political activities, and usage practices. It would also be useful to venture into less established and more novel methodological approaches in order to build original data sets and thus to stretch the boundaries of the field.

Before concluding, some observations on the applicability of the findings of the present research are needed. History shows that SNSs are relatively transient, as demonstrated by the cases of MySpace and Bebo, which have passed from headline news into gradual oblivion – due also to the rise of a formidable competitor like Facebook. It has to be recognised that Facebook could share a similar fate. Several commentaries in the press report an alleged

haemorrhage of Facebook users, particularly among the youngest members who are decamping to alternative SNSs such as Snapchat or Instagram (Lorber 2014; Wakefield 2014). Since a veil of secrecy hovers over Facebook statistics – a conduct questionable for an organisation which built its success on users’ sharing of information – these commentaries are often supported by anecdotal evidence. Nonetheless, a recent study by the digital consultancy, iStrategy Labs (2014), provides some hard evidence in support of these arguments: data generated by Facebook itself for its Social Advertising platform shows that Facebook has lost over three million US teen (13 to 17 years old) users since 2011 (whereas the 55+ age group has increased significantly). This exodus could be explained by the increasing presence of teens’ parents on this SNS, as shown in a research by the Pew Research Centre (Madden et al. 2013). Nonetheless, despite losing part of its young user base, Facebook remains the most dominant SNS worldwide, with 890 million daily active users (Socialbakers 2015), and its demise appears to be distant.

If and when this demise occurs, the author is confident that the findings of this thesis will still find application as they can be extended to other SNSs, and in certain cases to digital technologies in general. Evidence about the role of self-presentation, information-led mobilisation, and the exposure to political difference will remain valid as long as there are platforms sharing both the pull and push features of Facebook on which, as highlighted in this section, such findings rest. In contrast, the results concerning the role of media and political scenarios and more general determinants of political participation (e.g., political engagement, resources, recruitment network, etc.) can be extended to the Internet as a whole, as can the value of implementing more particularised approaches and less established methodologies.

Finally, the author would like to end this thesis with a quote that perfectly encapsulates the essence of its title, “ ‘It’s Complicated’: Facebook and Political Participation in Italy and the UK” – drawn explicitly from the titles of boyd’s (2014) account of the lives of *networked teens* and Vitak et al.’s (2011) analysis of undergraduate students’ Facebook political participation. This quote comes from one of the scholars who has most inspired this thesis and best grasped the nature of the strand of research to which the present study contributes.

Almost a decade has passed since Chadwick (2006) wrote the influential *Internet Politics*. After so many years, as shown in this thesis, his final remarks still remain relevant today:

Internet politics is a fast moving field characterized by uncertainty, paradox, overstatement and understatement. This fluidity is what makes it a fascinating area of study. When trying to make generalizations, perhaps the best we can hope for is an appreciation of the radically contingent nature of the field, and there is little likelihood that this facet is going to change in future (Chadwick, 2006, p. 326).

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Appendix A – Facebook Statistics for Italy and the UK

The source of these statistics is Socialbakers, one of the biggest Facebook statistics portals in the world.

United Kingdom

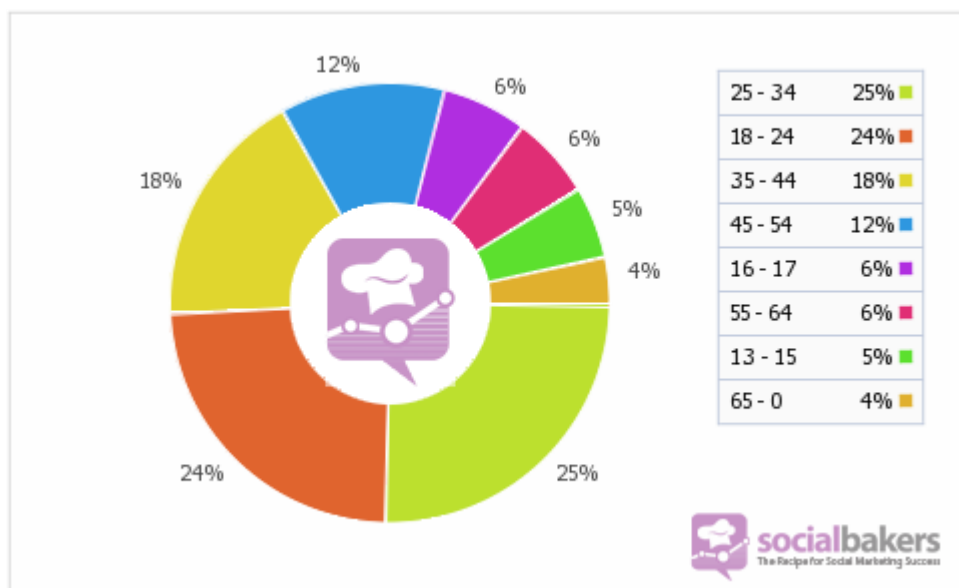
British Facebook Population:

- 28,940,400 (Socialbakers 2011)
- 30,265,580 (Socialbakers 2012)
- 30,157,300 (Socialbakers 2013)

Penetration of online population: 61.02% (Socialbakers 2013)

Penetration of total population: 51.61% (Socialbakers 2013)

Figure A1 – Distributions of Age Groups in the British Facebook Population



Source: Socialbakers 2012

Italy

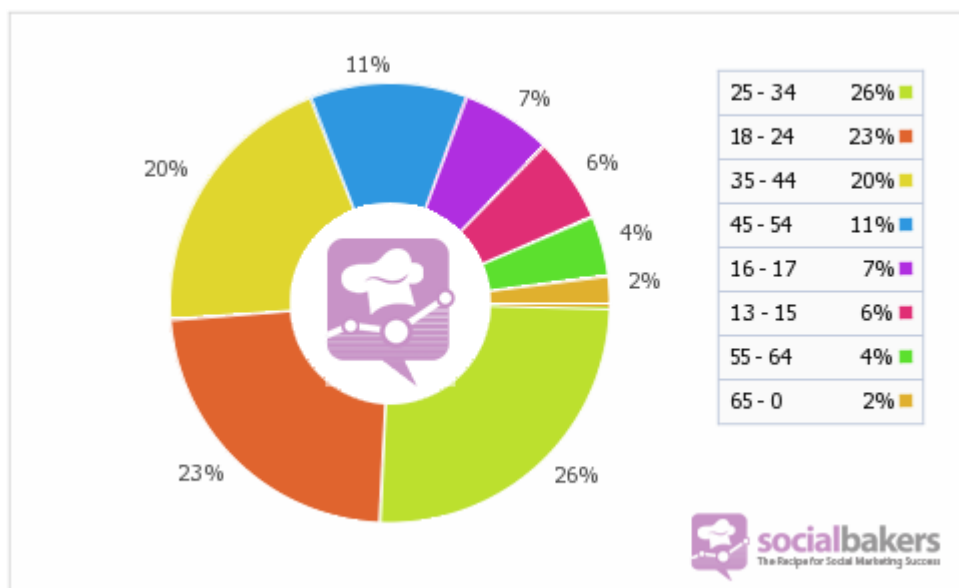
Italian Facebook Population:

- 18,438,760 (Socialbakers 2011)
- 19,211,580 (Socialbakers 2012)
- 21,721,940 (Socialbakers 2013)

Penetration of online population: 70.85 % (Socialbakers 2013)

Penetration of total population: 38.16 % (Socialbakers 2013)

Figure A2 – Distributions of Age Groups in the Italian Facebook Population



Source: Socialbakers 2012

Appendix B – Sizes of Samples and Age Ratios

Table B1 – Calculation of Sizes of Samples and Age Ratios

The target population was given by the Facebook population minus underage and over 65 users.

	Italian Facebook Population			British Facebook Population		
	19211580			30265580		
	%	n	%	%	n	%
13-15	0.08	1536926		0.07	2118591	
16-17	0.07	1344811		0.06	1815935	
18-24	0.24	4610779	0.289157	0.26	7869051	0.309524
25-34	0.26	4995011	0.313253	0.26	7869051	0.309524
35-44	0.19	3650200	0.228916	0.17	5145149	0.202381
45-54	0.1	1921158	0.120482	0.1	3026558	0.119048
55-64	0.04	768463.2	0.048193	0.05	1513279	0.059524
65+	0.02	384231.6		0.03	907967.4	
Sum		19211580	15945611		30265580	25423087
Italian Target Population			British Target Population			
15945611			25423087			

The sizes of the British and Italian target populations at the time of the data collection were considered in the calculation of the samples' sizes.

Through www.raosoft.com/samplesize.html using a confidence interval of 95% and allowing a 7% error, it was calculated that both the BS and the IS required 196 participants.

7% error, 95% CI	Italian Target Population: 15945611	Italian Sample Size: 196
7% error, 95% CI	British Target Population: 25423087	British Sample Size: 196

To increase the representativeness of the recruited samples a post-stratifying criterion was applied and the samples were weighted on the basis of the age distributions of the Italian and British Facebook Populations. The 45-54 and 55-65 age categories were unified due to their small sizes.

Table B2 – Post-Stratification of the Samples

	Italian Facebook Population			British Facebook Population		
	19211580			30265580		
	%	n	%	%	n	%
18-24	0.24	4610779	0.289157	0.26	7869051	0.309524
25-34	0.26	4995011	0.313253	0.26	7869051	0.309524
35-44	0.19	3650200	0.228916	0.17	5145149	0.202381
45-65	0.14	2689621	0.168675	0.15	4539837	0.178571
Sum		15945611	15945611		25423087	25423087

	Italian Sample		British Sample	
	%	Sample size	%	Sample size
18-24	0.27	53	0.28	55
25-34	0.31	61	0.29	57
35-44	0.24	47	0.21	41
45-64	0.18	35	0.22	43
Sum		196		196

Appendix C – Composition of Quantitative Samples

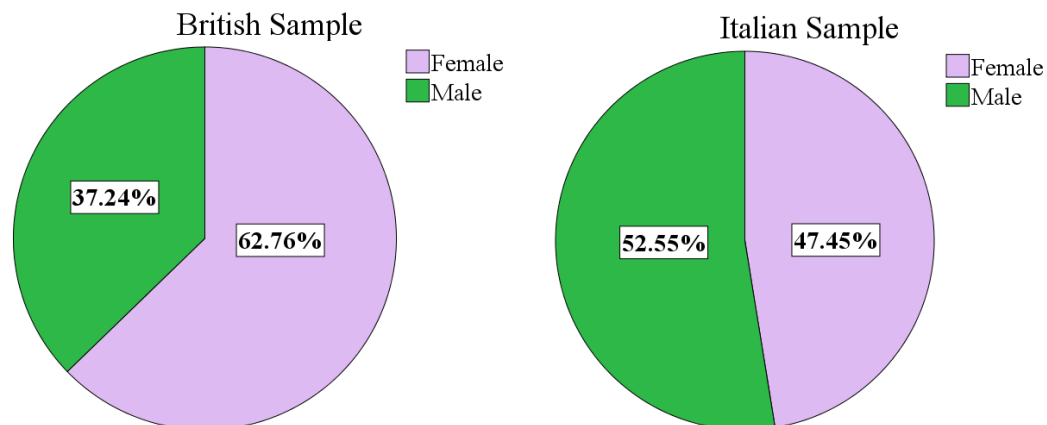
This appendix presents the composition of the British and Italian quantitative samples in terms of gender, age, education, occupation, and party affiliation. As shown in Appendix A, Socialbakers provided information about the sizes of the British and Italian Facebook populations and their age compositions. However, no information was offered with regards to gender, education and occupation. In order to obtain relevant statistics for these demographics, the researcher tried to contact Facebook through different means (e.g., e-mails, phone, feedback forms, etc.). Regrettably, Facebook proved to be completely unresponsive, and no other sources providing information on the composition of the target populations in terms of gender, education, and occupation were found.

Gender: As shown in the table and figures below, the BS contained a higher percentage of females than the IS.

Table C1 – Samples by Gender: Frequencies and Percentages

		Frequency	Percent
British Sample	Female	123	62.8
	Male	73	37.2
Italian Sample	Female	93	47.4
	Male	103	52.6

Figure C1 – Samples by Gender: Pie Charts



Considering that no information on the gender composition of the British and Italian Facebook populations could be found, the samples have been compared to the British and Italian Internet population instead. According to data from the ISTAT (2012), the gender

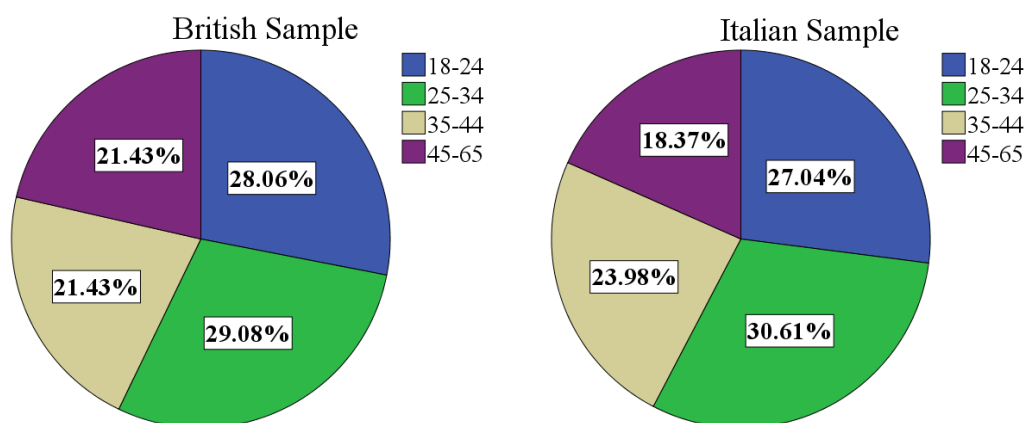
composition of the IS reflected that of the Italian Internet population where the gender gap is gradually decreasing (Females 47%; Males 53%). A recent report from Oxford Internet Institute (Dutton and Blank 2013) shows that the digital gender divide has also been steadily decreasing in the UK where there is no longer a statistically significant gender gap in Internet access. In this sense, given that the BS was skewed in terms of gender (i.e., higher percentages of females), it cannot be considered representative of the British Internet population with regards to this variable.

Age: The samples' age compositions were very similar. Age was the demographic variable used as post-stratifying criterion (see Section 4.4.3), and in relation to this variable the two samples were representative of the British and Italian Facebook populations (Appendix A).

Table C2 – Samples by Age: Frequencies and Percentages

		Frequency	Percent
British Sample	18-24	55	28.1
	25-34	57	29.1
	35-44	42	21.4
	45-65	42	21.4
	Total	196	100.0
Italian Sample	18-24	53	27.0
	25-34	60	30.6
	35-44	47	24.0
	45-65	36	18.4
	Total	196	100.0

Figure C2 – Samples by Age: Pie Charts



Education and occupation: The samples differed in terms of educational level and occupational status. The IS exhibited lower levels of education and occupation when compared to the BS.

Table C3 – Samples by Education: Frequencies and Percentages

		Frequency	Percent
British Sample	Less than Upper Secondary Education	6	3.1
	Upper Secondary Education	38	19.4
	Post-Secondary Non-Tertiary Education	14	7.1
	First Stage of Tertiary Education	127	64.8
	Second Stage of Tertiary Education	11	5.6
	Total	196	100.0
Italian Sample	Less than Upper Secondary Education	5	2.6
	Upper Secondary Education	94	48.0
	Post-Secondary Non-Tertiary Education	16	8.2
	First Stage of Tertiary Education	71	36.2
	Second Stage of Tertiary Education	10	5.1
	Total	196	100.0

Table C4 – Samples by Occupation: Frequencies and Percentages

		Frequency	Percent
British Sample	Large employer, manager and professional	60	30.6
	Intermediate and lower supervisor	34	17.3
	Small employer and own account worker	15	7.7
	White Collar Worker	25	12.8
	Blue Collar Worker	3	1.5
	Unemployed	12	6.1
	Student	47	24.0
	Total	196	100.0
Italian Sample	Large employer, manager and professional	20	10.2
	Intermediate and lower supervisor	5	2.6
	Small employer and own account worker	30	15.3
	White Collar Worker	47	24.0
	Blue Collar Worker	4	2.0
	Unemployed	25	12.8
	Student	65	33.2
	Total	196	100.0

As appears in the above tables, there were a few educational and occupational categories that applied only to a limited number of participants (e.g., less than upper secondary education or blue collar worker). To better compare the samples' educational and occupational levels, various categories were merged. In terms of education, two educational categories were developed: "Less than Tertiary Education" and "First and Second stage of Tertiary Education".

With regards to occupation, considering the ESeC's guidelines for a three category classification were followed (ISER 2011), and the "Working Class", "Intermediate", and "Managers and professionals" categories were generated. In addition, the categories "Students" and "Unemployed", which were not included in the ESeC's classification were also merged so to form a fourth category.

Table C5 – Samples by Education: Frequencies and Percentages with Merged Categories

		Frequency	Percent
British Sample	Less than Tertiary Education	62	31.6
	First and Second Stage of Tertiary Education	134	68.4
	Total	196	100.0
Italian Sample	Less than Tertiary Education	115	58.7
	First and Second Stage of Tertiary Education	81	41.3
	Total	196	100.0

Figure C3 – Samples by Education: Pie Charts with Merged Categories

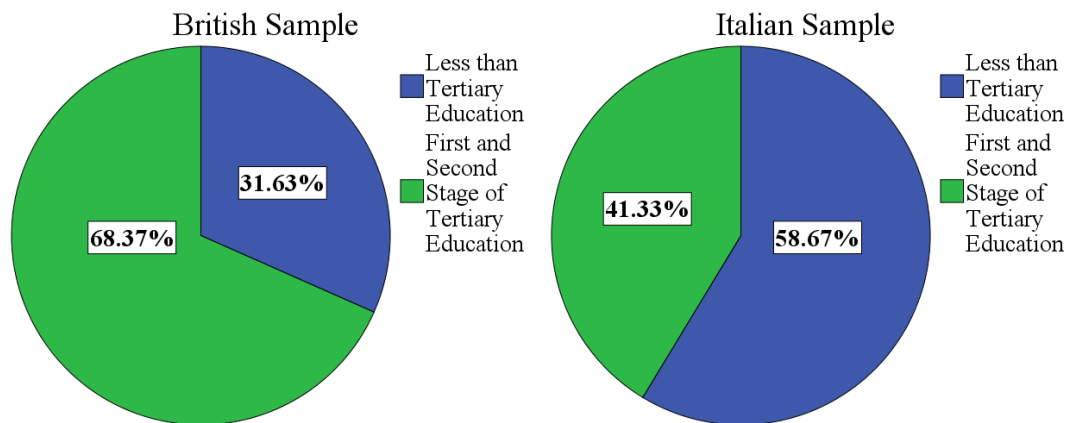
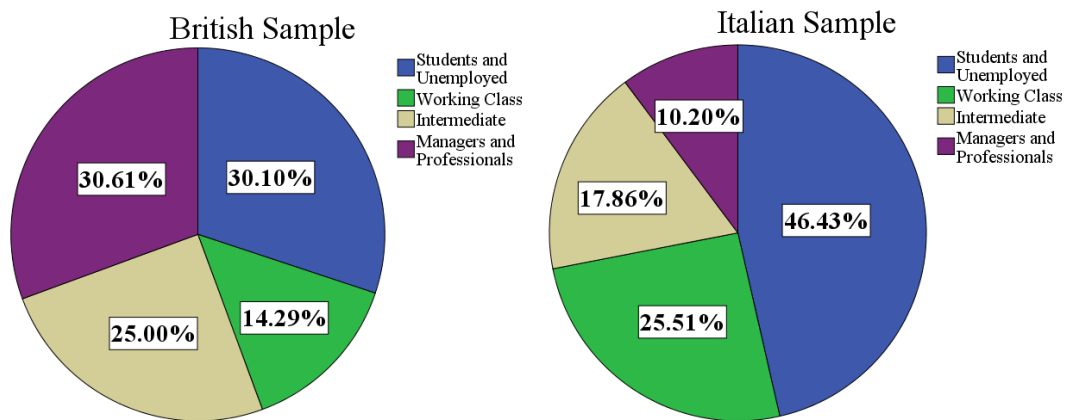


Table C6 – Samples by Occupation: Frequencies and Percentages with Merged Categories

		Frequency	Percent
British Sample	Students and Unemployed	59	30.1
	Working Class	28	14.3
	Intermediate	49	25.0
	Managers and Professionals	60	30.6
	Total	196	100.0
Italian Sample	Students and Unemployed	91	46.4
	Working Class	50	25.5
	Intermediate	35	17.9
	Managers and Professionals	20	10.2
	Total	196	100.0

Figure C4 – Samples by Occupation: Pie Charts with Merged Categories



As it is shown in the above tables and figures, the BS displayed higher educational and occupational levels than the IS. Similar results have also been produced in a cross-national study by eCircle, the leading digital marketing supplier across Europe (Wiewer and Anweiler 2010), focusing on six European countries: Britain, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, and Spain. Their samples included Internet users aged 14-69 and were representative of the Internet populations of the considered countries. As in the present research, also in the study by eCircle the BS had higher educational and occupational levels than the IS. In the last few years, the British and Italian Internet populations have seen an erosion of the digital divide in terms of education and income (Dutton and Blank 2013; ISTAT 2012). These trends have been confirmed in the samples of the present study. However, it has to be noted that the educational and occupational levels of the IS were considerably lower than the ones of the Italian Internet population. When compared to the British Internet population, the BS appeared to be more representative with respect to this variable.

Party affiliation: Concerning party affiliation, it is noticeable from the tables and figures below that many participants in both samples were not affiliated to a particular political party or movement. These results confirm, as highlighted in Section 5.2.1, British and Italian citizens' disaffection towards the political class. Certain political parties such as the Popolo delle Libertà or the Tories were under-represented in the samples, while a relevant percentage of participants fall into the "Other" category. In the BS, this could be explained through the high number of Scottish participants and to the popularity of the SNP in Scotland. The present research was carried out in a Scottish university and the researcher's social network employed in the snowball sampling strategy included many Scottish people. However, as also mentioned in Section 4.4.3 (see Quantitative research process), in order to guarantee a certain degree of diversity in terms of nationality, English, Welsh and Northern Irish participants were particularly targeted in the recruitment process. In relation to the IS, considering the results of the 2014 general election in Italy, it is plausible to expect that the "Other" category comprised many participants affiliated to the M5S. However, due to the way party affiliation was operationalised in the survey (a more detailed discussion of this issue can be found in Section 6.7), participants' affiliation to other popular parties such as the SNP, UKIP, the Greens, or the M5S could not be examined. Finally, it is worth noting that no relevant statistics on party affiliation for both British and Italian Facebook or Internet populations were found, and thus no considerations can be made on the representativeness of the samples with regards to this variable.

Table C7 – British Sample by Party Affiliation: Frequencies and Percentages

	Frequency	Percent
Conservative	23	11.7
Labour	46	23.5
Liberal Democrat	14	7.1
Other	49	25.0
No affiliation	64	32.7
Total	196	100.0

Figure C5 – British Sample by Party Affiliation: Pie Charts

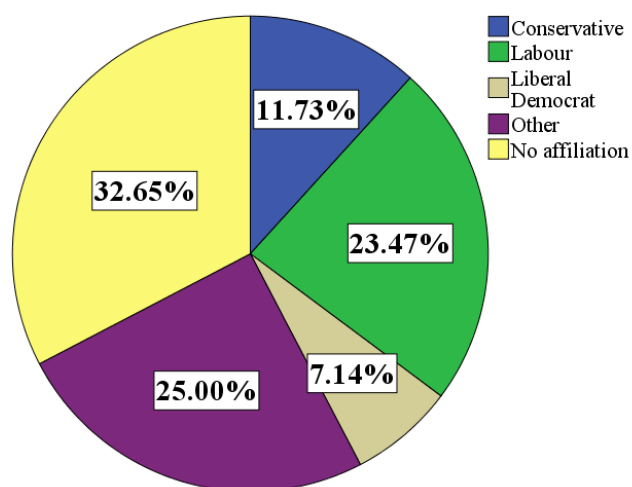
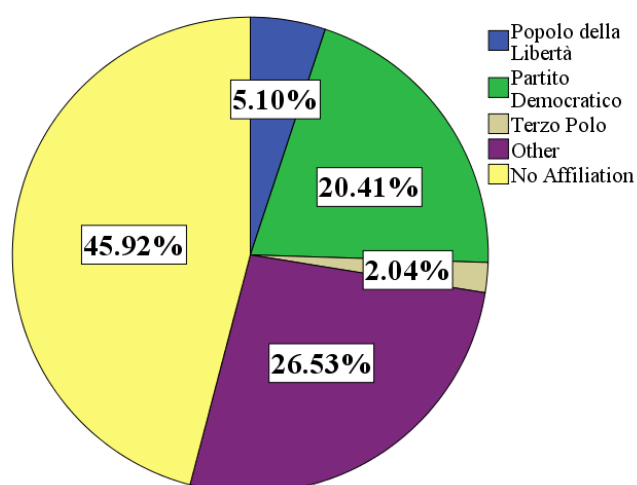


Table C8 – Italian Sample by Party Affiliation: Frequencies and Percentages

	Frequency	Percent
Popolo della Libertà	10	5.1
Partito Democratico	40	20.4
Terzo Polo	4	2.0
Other	52	26.5
No Affiliation	90	45.9
Total	196	100.0

Figure C6 – Italian Sample by Party Affiliation: Pie Charts



Appendix D – Qualitative Samples

British Sample

Table D1 – Composition of the British Qualitative Sample

	Age	Gender	Facebook Non-Political Usage	Facebook Political Participation	Internet Political Participation	Offline Political Participation	Most Used Venue of Participation
Participant I – Alastair	18-24	Male	High	High	Moderate	High	Facebook
Participant II – Alex	35-44	Male	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Facebook
Participant III – Andrew	25-34	Male	Low	Low	High	Low	The Internet
Participant IV – Callum	35-44	Male	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Moderate	---
Participant V – Ellie	18-24	Female	High	Low	Low	Low	---
Participant VI – Hazel	45-65	Female	Moderate	High	High	High	Facebook
Participant VII – Helen	25-34	Female	High	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Facebook
Participant VIII – Hilary	18-24	Female	High	Low	Moderate	High	Offline
Participant IX – Kaye	25-34	Female	Low	Low	Low	Moderate	Offline
Participant X – Lesley	45-65	Female	Low	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Offline
Participant XI – Rachel	45-65	Female	Moderate	High	High	High	The Internet
Participant XII – Tracey	18-24	Female	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Offline
Participant XIII – Vincent	35-44	Male	Low	High	Moderate	Low	Facebook

British Participants' Profiles

Alastair: Alastair is in the 18-24 age-group and educated to degree level. He is a young political activist and a student representative. He does not participate in party politics, but is very active in single-issue campaigns. Being an activist, he displays high levels of participation both offline and online. Alastair depicts Facebook as a very powerful and useful political tool. He employs this SNS to obtain political information, to discuss politics, and to promote political initiatives. However, he stresses that he uses Facebook mainly for recreational purposes and to communicate with friends.

Alex: Alex is in the 35-44 age-group and educated to degree level. He works as a consultant in the food industry and is also a music writer. He is left-leaning in terms of political alliance, but displays a limited political interest. Alex uses Facebook mainly for recreational purposes and is sceptical of the effectiveness of political activities carried out through this SNS. He appears particularly concerned about the trustworthiness of political information circulating on Facebook, demonstrating more trust in and appreciation of traditional media institutions. Despite this, sometimes he does engage in political activities through Facebook, disseminating information, signing and circulating petitions. In this sense, he even acknowledges that his participation has increased thanks to this SNS which has made participation much easier for him. He has two Facebook profiles: one for his music where he uses his real name, and another profile for which he does not use his real name, and where he engages, to a limited extent, in other activities including politics.

Andrew: Andrew is in the 35-44 age-group and educated to degree level. He works in hospitality and studies on a vocational course in film. Andrew is very critical of the political and media establishment and shows an appreciation for alternative sources and platforms. He is particularly interested in documentaries (he is currently working on one), in conspiracy theories and historic revisionism. He is very interested in politics and very active politically online, but not on Facebook. He enjoys the anonymity offered by the Internet and for this reason he does not participate politically on Facebook. Andrew uses this SNS to a very limited extent and does not consider it an appropriate political platform. Rather he sees it as a tool for communication and entertainment.

Callum: Callum is in the 35-44 age-group, and holds a college qualification. He works in technical support and therefore has very strong digital skills. He participates in several online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, RIC, and other online forums. He is interested in politics but not affiliated to any particular party or movement. His political participation

consists mainly in the consumption of political information and political discussion. Callum does not display a particular antagonism towards government and political institutions, and does not feel the need for mobilisation. He enjoys political discussion and engages in it offline but also, quite extensively, through several online platforms. Because of the presence of certain people within his Facebook network, he limits his political participation on this SNS. He mainly follows technology-related pages and employs this SNS mostly for entertainment purposes, general light talk, and to keep in touch with people.

Ellie: Ellie is in the 18-24 age-group, educated to degree level and working in administration. Ellie has no interest in politics, and could be described as politically apathetic. Her usage of Facebook is extremely high. She uses it every day for several hours from a variety of devices (e.g., mobile, laptop, etc.). She employs this SNS entirely for non-political purposes, mainly for entertainment and to communicate with friends who are also not interested in politics. Sometimes on Facebook Ellie comes across political information, but she ignores it as she considers it irrelevant to her.

Hazel: Hazel is in the 45-65 age-group and educated to degree level. She is a doctor and works for the NHS. She is a member of the Labour party, which she joined because of their campaigns against the privatisation of the NHS. She is very active politically, but her involvement in political activism is relatively recent. Hazel considers Facebook instrumental to the evolution of her political interest and involvement and depicts this SNS as a key tool for obtaining political information and promoting political initiatives. She also often employs this SNS for entertainment purposes (e.g., games), and, to a lesser degree, to keep in touch with family and friends.

Helen: Helen is in the 25-34 age-group, studying towards a degree and working part-time in hospitality. She has an interest politics, which has recently developed, and is left-leaning in terms of political ideology. Helen is sceptical of British political institutions and mainstream media. She has a very high level of Facebook activity and employs the SNS as an all-round platform through which she engages in a variety of activities ranging from information to recreation and communication. Her political activity is limited to the consumption and diffusion of political information, and, because of health related issues, to online activity.

Hilary: Hilary is in the 18-24 age-group and is studying towards a degree in PR. She exhibits high levels of political interest and comes from a politically active family (one of her parents is a politician). She supports the Conservative party and is politically active offline, while she limits her online participation to the consumption of political news. Hilary

has a positive perception of political institutions and mainstream media in general, which she considers much more trustworthy than online sources. She is very conscious of being a Conservative and prefers to keep her affiliation hidden from her friends. For this reason she uses Facebook mainly for non-political activities (i.e., light-hearted chat, to keep up with friends, and for entertainment) and posts political material, to a limited extent, only during electoral periods.

Kaye: Kaye is in the 25-34 age-group, educated to degree level, and runs her own small business. She has limited digital skills which limit her political and non-political online activity. Kaye shows a certain level of interest in politics but is not affiliated to any specific party or movement and believes that a lack of a political network hinders, in part, her political participation. She does not use Facebook much and when she does, she tends to use it for light-hearted chatting and entertainment. However, Kaye acknowledges the presence of political information on this SNS, and the fact that she has been exposed to political content as a result.

Lesley: Lesley is in the 45-65 age-group and educated to degree level. She works as a translator and is a medical herbalist. Lesley displays a high level of political interest and, in terms of political alliance, she is left-leaning. However, she is not affiliated to any particular political party and is critical of the British political class and mainstream media. Her political participation consists mainly in the consumption of political information and political discussion, but she also engages in single-issue campaigns concerning community education, sustainable living and health care. Her political participation occurs mainly offline as she is particularly sceptical of online political participation. Lesley seems to be especially concerned about the use online-based corporations make of users' data, and she questions the credibility of information circulating on SNSs. She employs Facebook to a very limited extent, considers this SNS a time-waster, and prefers to use Twitter instead.

Rachel: Rachel is in the 45-65 age-group and educated to Master's level. She is a politician, member of the Green party, and a former member of the Liberal Democrats. Rachel defines herself as a political animal and is extremely active offline and online. She uses a range of online platforms, from forums and blogs to Facebook groups and pages. She also uses this SNS to maintain her social and professional networks, but for her Facebook is mainly a political tool. Rachel runs and participates in several Facebook groups, some affiliated to the Greens, which she uses to communicate internally with members of the party and to engage with the general public, and some for local single-issue campaigns.

Tracey: Tracey is in the 18-24 age-group and is studying towards a PhD in Arts. She has a varied information diet and gets political information through a variety of sources such as newspapers, TV, online newspapers, radio and Facebook. Tracey is interested in politics, has many friends who are politically active, and participates politically both online and offline. She is particularly active on Facebook. She employs this SNS for communication and information purposes, but also she uses it quite often for political discussion, and once used it for a campaign she was involved in which aimed to increase the public's awareness of asthma.

Vincent: Vincent is in the 35-44 age-group and educated to degree level. He is a scientist, living and working abroad. He shows a keen interest in politics and identifies with the Labour party. Being abroad, he tends not to participate politically offline, and his political participation is therefore limited to online activities. In this sense he considers Facebook a crucial political tool, and employs it for discussing politics with friends, obtaining and spreading political information. Vincent also uses this SNS to keep in touch with friends, but Facebook is for him a political tool more than anything else.

Italian Sample

Table D2 – Composition of the Italian Qualitative Sample

	Age	Gender	Facebook Non-Political Usage	Facebook Political Participation	Internet Political Participation	Offline Political Participation	Most Used Venue of Participation
Participant I – Alessandro	35-44	Male	High	Moderate	Low	Low	Facebook
Participant II – Antonio	45-65	Female	Moderate	High	High	High	Facebook
Participant III – Ciro	25-34	Male	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Offline
Participant IV – Francesca	18-24	Female	High	High	Moderate	High	Offline
Participant V – Gaia	18-24	Female	Moderate	Low	Low	Low	---
Participant VI – Giuliano	35-44	Male	Moderate	High	Moderate	High	Facebook
Participant VII – Luca	35-44	Male	Low	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Offline
Participant VIII – Luigi	45-65	Male	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Facebook
Participant IX – Mario	18-24	Male	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate	The Internet
Participant X – Martina	45-65	Female	High	High	Moderate	High	Facebook
Participant XI – Raffaella	25-34	Female	High	High	Low	Low	Facebook
Participant XII – Rosaria	18-24	Female	High	Moderate	High	Moderate	The Internet
Participant XIII – Virginia	25-34	Female	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Facebook

Italian Participants' Profiles

Alessandro: Alessandro is in the 25-34 age-group, educated to High School level, and unemployed. He is very critical of Italian political institutions and mainstream media. He shows a certain degree of political interest but displays a strong aversion towards traditional politics. His political participation is limited to the consumption of political information. In this sense he is very active on Facebook, and he considers other political activities to be very limited in terms of effectiveness. He prefers online sources to traditional ones such as TV and newspapers, which he believes to be an expression of the corrupt Italian political system. His levels of Facebook activity are high and he uses this SNS as an all-round platform, mainly to communicate and keep up with his social network and for entertainment purposes (e.g., playing games, watching sport and music videos), but also for political and non-political informational purposes. His political participation offline and on other online platforms is almost non-existent.

Antonio: Antonio is in the 45-65 age-group and educated to degree level. He works for the Italian Communist party (Rifondazione Comunista) and deals with immigration related issues. Politics is therefore both his passion and his job. Antonio is very active politically, both offline and online, making use of several online platforms and forums. His primary sources of political information are mainstream media, online newspapers, blogs, and Facebook pages. He seems to prefer online sources because he considers them to be more varied and less influenced by the political establishment. Antonio considers Facebook a very valuable political tool, to be combined with offline activity, and a tool which can increase the reach of political initiatives and generate more political participation. Antonio also uses Facebook for a wide number of non-political activities ranging from communication to information and entertainment.

Ciro: Ciro is in the 25-34 age-group, studying towards a Master's in Sociology and New Media. He shows a keen interest in politics but does not support any particular party or movement, and tends to engage mainly in political communication activities, both online and offline. His information diet is extremely varied and includes mainstream media such as TV, newspapers, and radio, but also online newspapers and blogs. Facebook is his main political participation platform, and through this SNS he often obtains political information and engages in political discussions. Facebook plays an important role in Ciro's life, as he uses this SNS not only for political and non-political (e.g., sport) information, but also to maintain

and communicate with both his social and professional network, to express moods and thoughts, and to promote a series of activities in which he is involved.

Francesca: Francesca is in the 18-24 age-group, studying towards a degree in Languages. She is a left-leaning student political activist, critical of Italian political institutions and mainstream media. Francesca prefers online information sources, which she considers freer and more varied, to offline ones, which she perceives as strongly influenced by the political class. Facebook is a key source in her information diet and she depicts this SNS as a crucial tool for activists, to be combined with offline activity. Francesca acknowledges that Facebook has become her main tool to communicate with family, friends and contacts, and to obtain information, both political and non-political.

Gaia: Gaia is in the 18-24 age-group, studying towards a degree in Biotechnology. She has no interest in politics and her political participation is almost non-existent and limited to the consumption, from time to time, of political information through mobile apps, newspaper websites, and the Facebook New Feed. Gaia uses Facebook on a daily basis and her usage is particularly varied. She employs this SNS mainly to keep in touch with friends, for entertainment (e.g. music and games), but also for university related activities and for information.

Giuliano: Giuliano is in the 35-44 age-group, educated to degree level and owner of a company which deals with online sales. He is an activist of the M5S and consequently is very politically active online and on Facebook. Particularly critical of mainstream media, the Internet is for him the main source of political information. Facebook is a key political tool for Giuliano and is by far the most used online platform for communicating with his fellow activists, discussing politics, obtaining political information, organising and promoting political initiatives. Giuliano has advanced digital skills and also uses Facebook for his business, for which he has a separate profile, and to keep in touch with friends.

Luca: Luca is in the 35-44 age-group, educated to Master's level, working as a regional sales manager. He is very interested in politics but displays a strong disaffection towards Italian political institutions. He limits his political participation to political discussion and the consumption of political information, mainly online (i.e., online newspapers and Facebook) and through the radio. He enjoys discussing politics but is very selective with his interlocutors. For this reason, his political discussion occurs almost exclusively offline where he is more in control of the discussion and its participants. He tends to use Facebook daily, mainly for communicating with his network and for information purposes.

Luigi: Luigi is in the 45-65 age-group, educated to High School level, working as a photographer. He is politically interested, left-leaning, and uses Facebook a lot both politically and non-politically. Luigi is digitally savvy. Facebook is the only SNS that he uses, and he employs it mainly for communication and information purposes. Because of his job, hobbies and high levels of online activity, he has been able to build a large network of Facebook friends. Such a network constantly provides him with political and non-political information, and enables him to learn about events, both political and non-political, in which he has often taken part. Luigi enjoys discussing politics both online and offline, and consumes also a lot of information from radio, TV, and online newspapers.

Mario: Mario is in the 18-24 age-group, studying towards a degree in Language and Economy. He is a young political activist, particularly active in the university circle. Mario is very critical of Italian political institutions and is not affiliated to any political movement. He uses a range of different online platforms for both political communication and mobilisation purposes, and acknowledges the dominance of Facebook in the toolkit of young activists. He exhibits moderate levels of Facebook political and non-political activity, preferring offline-based activism which he considers the foundation of Facebook political activity. He uses this SNS mainly for obtaining and spreading information, but also to a limited extent for communicating with some of his friends and contacts.

Martina: Martina is in the 45-65 age-group, educated to High School level, working as a council officer for the Mayor of Naples. Because of her position she has a day-to-day involvement with politics, and is affiliated to the left-leaning party of the Mayor. She is very active politically both offline and online, employing a variety of platforms ranging from online forums and newspaper websites to Facebook. She uses this SNS to a great extent for political purposes. She manages a Facebook group affiliated to the Mayor through which she spreads information and promotes initiatives. She also uses Facebook to obtain information and engage in political discussion. In terms of non-political participation, Martina employs Facebook quite extensively for her hobby, photography, and for entertainment (i.e., games), while rarely for communicating with her network.

Raffaella: Raffaella is in the 25-34 age-group, educated to High School level, and owns and works in a beauty shop. She has a moderate interest in politics, was previously affiliated to the Centre-right coalition, but is now very critical towards Italian political institutions and disengaged from party politics. Because of this disengagement she limits her participation mainly to the consumption of political information. Raffaella uses Facebook often, for both

political and non-political purposes, and she acknowledges that this SNS is her main source of political and non-political information. She also engages in a variety of other activities through this SNS. She uses it for entertainment, to keep in touch with friends, and even to engage with her local community through a Facebook group.

Rosaria: Rosaria is in the 25-34 age-group, educated to degree level, working as an administrative officer and tutor in a cultural organisation. She does not have any particular political alliance but sympathises with the aims of the M5S. She engages in political communication activities both offline and online and also takes part in several offline political initiatives. Her online activity is, to a certain extent, almost entirely Facebook-based. This SNS is her main source of politically relevant information (e.g., news and information about political initiatives). She also uses Facebook for a number of other purposes: for work, to communicate with her professional network, to keep in touch with certain people, and to express her feelings, thoughts and moods.

Virginia: Virginia is in the 25-34 age-group, studying towards a Doctorate in Economy and Tourism. She shows a detachment from Italian political institutions and a moderate level of political interest. In terms of politics she tends to engage mainly in the consumption of political information which she obtains almost exclusively online, through newspaper websites, mobile apps and, in particular, Facebook. Facebook emerges as extremely relevant to Virginia who uses this SNS to maintain her social but also professional network and especially for information purposes. Because of her limited interest in and knowledge of politics, she keeps her political participation on Facebook to a minimum (i.e., consumption of political information), intentionally avoiding other forms of political participation such as political discussion or mobilisation related activities, in which she engages offline to a limited extent.

Appendix E – Questionnaires

British Questionnaire

Welcome

Welcome to the "Facebook and Political Participation" survey. Firstly, I would like to thank you for clicking on the announcement.

This survey is the first phase of my PhD research investigating the impact of Facebook on political participation.

If you would like to learn more about the study and data protection policy please visit the following website: <https://sites.google.com/site/phdprojectqmu/>

This survey will take around **10 minutes** to complete.

To participate you will have to be a **British citizen** between the age of **18 and 65** and a **Facebook user**.

To show you my appreciation for taking part in the study a random draw will be held. Your name will be entered in the draw and the winner will be rewarded with a **£30 voucher/mobile top-up**. Further info on the rewards can be found on the website.

If you have any questions please e-mail icasteltrione@qmu.ac.uk or post a comment on the "Homepage" of the website.

Thank you very much for your help and enjoy the survey.

Consent Form

I have read and understood the information provided about this study.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions about my participation.

I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in this study.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this study at any stage without giving any reason.

I agree to participate in this study.

Demographics

Questions are **mandatory**.

Please select only **one answer** for each question.

Note that once you have clicked on the CONTINUE button your answers are submitted and you cannot return to review or amend that page.

1. Are you?

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male

2. What is your age?

- ☐ 18-24 years old
- ☐ 25-34 years old
- ☐ 35-44 years old
- ☐ 45-65 years old

3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ☐ Less than Upper Secondary Education (i.e. left school without any formal qualification)
- ☐ Upper Secondary Education (i.e. Standard, Intermediate, Higher & Advanced Higher Grade; CSYS; GCE A/AS Level; GCSEs; GNVQ/GSVQ Foundation, Intermediate & Advanced; NVQ Levels 1, 2 & 3)
- ☐ Post-Secondary Non-Tertiary Education (i.e. HE Access Courses)
- ☐ First Stage of Tertiary Education (i.e. BA; BS; MA; MS; PGCE; PGDE; NVQ Levels 4 & 5; HNC; HND; CertHE; DipHE)
- ☐ Second Stage of Tertiary Education (i.e. Doctorate; PhD)

4. What is your main job or occupation?

- ☐ Large employer, manager and professional (es. company director, teacher, doctor, pilot, etc.)
- ☐ Intermediate and lower supervisor
- ☐ Small employer and own account worker
- ☐ White collar worker (e.g. clerk)
- ☐ Blue collar worker (e.g. labourer)
- ☐ Unemployed
- ☐ Student

Media Usage

5. How much time do you usually spend **daily** watching TV?

- ☐ None at all
- ☐ Less than 1 hour
- ☐ 1 to 3 hours
- ☐ 3 to 5 hours
- ☐ More than 5 hours

6. How much time do you usually spend **daily** reading newspapers and/or periodicals?

- ☐ None at all
- ☐ Less than 1 hour
- ☐ 1 to 3 hours
- ☐ 3 to 5 hours
- ☐ More than 5 hours

7. How much time do you usually spend **daily** listening to the radio?

- ☐ None at all
- ☐ Less than 1 hour
- ☐ 1 to 3 hours
- ☐ 3 to 5 hours
- ☐ More than 5 hours

8. How much time do you usually spend **daily** on the internet (excluding Facebook)?

- ☐ None at all
- ☐ Less than 1 hour
- ☐ 1 to 3 hours
- ☐ 3 to 5 hours
- ☐ More than 5 hours

9. In the last six months how often did you consume (read/listen/watch) political news through the following media?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
a. TV	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Press	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Radio	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Internet (excluding Facebook)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. Facebook	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Political Engagement

10. How often do you follow what is going on in government and public affairs?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Very often

11. Generally speaking, you usually think of yourself as

- ☐ Conservative
- ☐ Labour
- ☐ Liberal Democrat
- ☐ Other
- ☐ No affiliation

12. What is your level of support for your preferred political party/movement? (select "Not applicable" if you answered "No affiliation" in the previous question)

- ☐ Not strong at all
- ☐ Not strong
- ☐ Neither strong nor weak
- ☐ Strong
- ☐ Very strong
- ☐ Not applicable

13. What political office is now held by Nick Clegg?

- ☐ Prime Minister
- ☐ Chancellor of the Exchequer
- ☐ Deputy Prime Minister
- ☐ Lord High Steward
- ☐ I don't know

14. At the moment, who is the leader of the Labour Party (UK)?

- ☐ Nick Clegg
- ☐ Gordon Brown
- ☐ Ed Miliband
- ☐ David Cameron
- ☐ I don't know

15. How many times can the House of Lords reject a bill within a year?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ One time
- ☐ Two times
- ☐ Three times
- ☐ I don't know

16. Which political party would you say is more right-wing?

- ☐ Conservative Party
- ☐ Labour Party
- ☐ Liberal Democrats
- ☐ Green Party
- ☐ I don't know

17. At the moment, which party has the most members in the House of Commons?

- ☐ Conservative Party
- ☐ Labour Party
- ☐ Liberal Democrats
- ☐ Green Party
- ☐ I don't know

Please indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements:

18. The government doesn't care about people like me

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly agree

19. Politics seems so complicated that I can't really understand it.

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly agree

Facebook Usage

20. How much time do you usually spend **daily** on Facebook?

- ☒ Less than 1 hour
- ☐ 1 to 3 hours
- ☐ 3 to 5 hours
- ☐ More than 5 hours

Please indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements:

21. Facebook is part of my everyday activity.

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly agree

22. I feel out of touch when I haven't logged onto Facebook for a while.

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly agree

23. I feel I am part of the Facebook community.

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly agree

24. I would be sorry if Facebook closed down.

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly agree

Facebook Non-political Activities

25. In the last six months how often did you engage in the following activities **through Facebook**?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
a. Watching/listening/reading non-political news (e.g. sport)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Posting/uploading non-political material (e.g. music videos)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Visiting profiles of non-political actors or organisations (e.g. celebrities)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Contacting family and friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. Non-political talk (e.g. gossip)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. Searching for non-political initiatives (e.g. concerts)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g. Sharing information on non-political initiatives	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
h. Organising non-political initiatives (e.g. nights out)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
i. Joining a non-political group (e.g. fan club)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Facebook and Political Participation

26. In the last six months how often did you engage in the following activities **through Facebook**?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
a. Organising/participating in a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Forming/joining a group or an organisation developed around politics	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Soliciting others to support or oppose a particular political party, candidate, and/or initiative	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Contacting a political party, candidate, government department and/or local council	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest in which you took part	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g. Learning about a group or an organisation developed around politics	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
h. Engaging in formal and informal political discussions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
i. Expressing a political opinion (e.g. publishing/commenting on a post concerning politics)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Political Participation

The Internet and Political Participation

27. In the last six months how often did you engage in the following activities through the internet (excluding Facebook)?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
a. Organising/participating in a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Forming/joining a group or an organisation developed around politics	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Soliciting others to support or oppose a particular political party, candidate, and/or initiative	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Contacting a political party, candidate, government department and/or local council	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest in which you took part	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g. Learning about a group or an organisation developed around politics	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
h. Engaging in formal and informal political discussions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
i. Expressing a political opinion (e.g. publishing/commenting on a post concerning politics)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Offline Political Participation

28. In the last six months how often did you engage in the following activities through neither Facebook nor the internet?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
a. Organising/participating in a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Forming/joining a group or an organisation developed around politics	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Soliciting others to support or oppose a particular political party, candidate, and/or initiative	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Contacting a political party, candidate, government department and/or local council	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest in which you took part	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g. Learning about a group or an organisation developed around politics	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
h. Engaging in formal and informal political discussions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
i. Expressing a political opinion (e.g. commenting on a piece of news)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Italian Questionnaire

Benvenuto

Benvenuto al questionario "Facebook e la Partecipazione Politica". Prima di tutto, vorrei ringraziarla per aver clickato sull'annuncio.

Questo questionario è la prima fase del mio dottorato di ricerca che mira ad esaminare l'impatto di Facebook sulla partecipazione politica.

Se vuole saperne di più sul progetto di ricerca e sul sistema atto a garantire la protezione dei dati la prego di visitare il seguente sito web:

<https://sites.google.com/site/progettodiricercaphd/>

Questo questionario richiederà circa **10 minuti**.

Per partecipare è necessario essere un **cittadino italiano** di età compresa tra **i 18 ed i 65 anni** ed un **utente di Facebook**.

Per dimostrare il mio apprezzamento verso i partecipanti che hanno preso parte allo studio verrà effettuato un sorteggio. Il Suo nome sarà inserito nel sorteggio e, nel caso dovesse risultare vincitore/ice, Lei verrà premiato/a con un **buono/ricarica di cellulare del valore di 30 €**. Può trovare ulteriori informazioni sui premi omaggio nel sopracitato sito web.

Se ha domande la prego di inviare una e-mail a icasteltrione@qmu.ac.uk o di lasciare un commento sulla "Homepage" del sito web.

La ringrazio molto per il Suo aiuto e spero che apprezzerà il questionario.

Modulo di consenso

Ho letto e compreso le informazioni fornite su questo studio.

Ho avuto l'opportunità di porre domande circa la mia partecipazione.

Capisco che non sono obbligato a prendere parte a questo studio.

Mi rendo conto che ho il diritto di abbandonare il presente studio in qualsiasi momento, senza dare alcuna motivazione.

Accetto di partecipare a questo studio.

Domande demografiche

Le domande sono **obbligatorie**.

Si prega di selezionare **una sola risposta** per ogni domanda.

Si noti che una volta clickato sul pulsante CONTINUA le Sue risposte saranno inviate e non sarà possibile tornare indietro per rivederle o modificarle.

1. Lei è?	
<input type="radio"/>	Donna
<input type="radio"/>	Uomo
2. Qual'è la Sua età?	
<input type="radio"/>	18- 24 anni
<input type="radio"/>	25- 34 anni
<input type="radio"/>	35- 44 anni
<input type="radio"/>	45- 65 anni
3. Qual'è il più alto livello di istruzione da Lei completato?	
<input type="radio"/>	Meno della Istruzione Secondaria Superiore (es. Licenza Media)
<input type="radio"/>	Istruzione Secondaria Superiore (ossia Maturità)
<input type="radio"/>	Istruzione Post-diploma (es. corsi regionali, alta formazione artistica e musicale, scuole superiori per la mediazione linguistica)
<input type="radio"/>	Istruzione Universitaria (es. Laurea Triennale, Laurea Specialistica, Master di Primo e Secondo Livello)
<input type="radio"/>	Istruzione Post-laurea (ossia Dottorato di Ricerca)
4. Qual'è il Suo principale lavoro o occupazione?	
<input type="radio"/>	Datore di lavoro di grandi dimensioni, manager o professionista (es. amministratore delegato, insegnante, medico, pilota, ecc.)
<input type="radio"/>	Supervisore di livello intermedio o minore
<input type="radio"/>	Piccolo datore di lavoro o libero professionista
<input type="radio"/>	Impiegato
<input type="radio"/>	Operaio
<input type="radio"/>	Disoccupato
<input type="radio"/>	Studente

Utilizzo dei mezzi di comunicazione

5. Di solito quanto tempo passa **quotidianamente** a guardare la TV?

- ☐ Niente
- ☐ Meno di 1 ora
- ☐ da 1 a 3 ore
- ☐ da 3 a 5 ore
- ☐ Più di 5 ore

6. Di solito quanto tempo passa **quotidianamente** a leggere quotidiani e/o periodici?

- ☐ Niente
- ☐ Meno di 1 ora
- ☐ 1 a 3 ore
- ☐ 3 a 5 ore
- ☐ Più di 5 ore

7. Di solito quanto tempo passa **quotidianamente** ad ascoltare la radio?

- ☐ Niente
- ☐ Meno di 1 ora
- ☐ 1 a 3 ore
- ☐ 3 a 5 ore
- ☐ Più di 5 ore

8. Di solito quanto tempo passa **quotidianamente** su internet (non includendo Facebook)?

- ☐ Niente
- ☐ Meno di 1 ora
- ☐ 1 a 3 ore
- ☐ 3 a 5 ore
- ☐ Più di 5 ore

9. Negli ultimi sei mesi quante volte ha seguito notizie politiche attraverso i seguenti mezzi di comunicazione?

	Mai	Raramente	A volte	Spesso	Molto spesso
a. TV	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Stampa	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
c. Radio	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Internet (non includendo Facebook)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
e. Facebook	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Impegno politico

10. Di solito quante volte segue notizie di interesse pubblico e/o quello che sta succedendo nel governo?

- ☒ Mai
- ☐ Raramente
- ☐ A volte
- ☐ Spesso
- ☐ Molto spesso

11. In generale, Lei si considera del

- ☐ Popolo della Libertà
- ☐ Partito Democratico
- ☐ Terzo Polo
- ☐ Altro
- ☐ Nessuna affiliazione

12. Come considera il Suo sostegno verso il partito/movimento politico da Lei preferito? (Selezionare "Non applicabile" se ha risposto "Nessuna affiliazione" nella domanda precedente)

- ☐ Per niente forte
- ☐ Non forte
- ☐ Né forte né debole
- ☐ Forte
- ☐ Molto forte
- ☐ Non applicabile

13. Quale carica pubblica è detenuta ora da Gianfranco Fini?

- ☐ Presidente della Repubblica
- ☐ Primo Ministro
- ☐ Presidente della Camera
- ☐ Presidente del Senato
- ☐ Non lo so

14. Al momento, chi è il segretario del Partito Democratico?

- ☐ Antonio Di Pietro
- ☐ Dario Franceschini
- ☐ Pier Luigi Bersani
- ☐ Silvio Berlusconi
- ☐ Non lo so

15. Quante volte il Presidente della Repubblica può rimandare una legge al Parlamento?

- ☐ Mai
- ☐ Una volta
- ☐ Due volte
- ☐ Tre volte
- ☐ Non lo so

16. Quale partito politico Lei ritiene che sia maggiormente di destra?

- ☐ Popolo della Libertà
- ☐ Partito Democratico
- ☐ UDC
- ☐ Italia dei Valori
- ☐ Non lo so

17. Al momento, quale partito ha la maggioranza nel Parlamento italiano?

- ☐ Popolo della Libertà
- ☐ Partito Democratico
- ☐ UDC
- ☐ Italia dei Valori
- ☐ Non lo so

La prego di indicare quanto concorda con ciascuna delle seguenti affermazioni:

18. I funzionari pubblici non si preoccupano di persone come me.

- ☐ In completo disaccordo
- ☐ In disaccordo
- ☐ Né d'accordo né in disaccordo
- ☐ D'accordo
- ☐ Completamente d'accordo

19. La politica sembra così complicata che le persone come me non possono capirla.

- ☐ In completo disaccordo
- ☐ In disaccordo
- ☐ Né d'accordo né in disaccordo
- ☐ D'accordo
- ☐ Completamente d'accordo

Utilizzo di Facebook

20. Di solito quanto tempo passa **quotidianamente** su Facebook?

- ☐ Meno di 1 ora
- ☐ 1 a 3 ore
- ☐ 3 a 5 ore
- ☐ Più di 5 ore

La prego di indicare quanto concorda con ciascuna delle seguenti affermazioni:

21. Facebook è parte della mia attività quotidiana.

- ☐ In completo disaccordo
- ☐ In disaccordo
- ☐ Né d'accordo né in disaccordo
- ☐ D'accordo
- ☐ Completamente d'accordo

22. Non mi sento aggiornato quando non accedo a Facebook per un pò.

- ☐ In completo disaccordo
- ☐ In disaccordo
- ☐ Né d'accordo né in disaccordo
- ☐ D'accordo
- ☐ Completamente d'accordo

23. Mi sento parte della comunità di Facebook.

- ☐ In completo disaccordo
- ☐ In disaccordo
- ☐ Né d'accordo né in disaccordo
- ☐ D'accordo
- ☐ Completamente d'accordo

24. Mi dispiacerebbe se Facebook chiudesse.

- ☐ In completo disaccordo
- ☐ In disaccordo
- ☐ Né d'accordo né in disaccordo
- ☐ D'accordo
- ☐ Completamente d'accordo

Facebook ed attività non-politica

25. Negli ultimi sei mesi quante volte ha svolto le seguenti attività tramite Facebook?

	Mai	Raramente	Qualche volta	Spesso	Molto spesso
a. Guardare/ascoltare/leggere notizie non politiche (es. sport)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Scrivere/condividere materiale non-politico (es. video musicali)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Visitare profili di persone o organizzazioni non-politiche (es. celebrità)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Contattare familiari ed amici	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. Discutere ma non di politica (es. gossip)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. Ricerare iniziative non-politiche (es. concerti)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g. Condividere informazioni su iniziative non-politiche	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
h. Organizzare iniziative non-politiche (es. serate fuori)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
i. Iscrivere ad un gruppo non-politico (es. fan club)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Facebook ed attività politica

26. Negli ultimi sei mesi quante volte ha svolto le seguenti attività tramite Facebook?

	Mai	Raramente	Qualche volta	Spesso	Molto spesso
a. Organizzare/partecipare ad un'iniziativa, riunione, manifestazione e/o protesta politica	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Formare/iscrivere ad un gruppo e/o un'organizzazione che si occupa di politica	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Sollecitare gli altri a sostenere o contrastare un particolare partito, candidato, e/o iniziativa politica	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Contattare un partito e/o candidato politico, un dipartimento governativo, e/o le amministrazioni locali	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. Venire a conoscenza di un'iniziativa, riunione, manifestazione e/o protesta politica	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. Venire a conoscenza di un'iniziativa, riunione, manifestazione e/o protesta politica in cui ha poi partecipato	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g. Venire a conoscenza di un gruppo e/o un'organizzazione che si occupa di politica	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
h. Prendere parte in discussioni politiche formali e informali	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
i. Esprimere un giudizio politico (es. pubblicare/commentare un post riguardante la politica)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Partecipazione politica

Internet ed attività politica

27. Negli ultimi sei mesi quante volte ha svolto le seguenti attività **tramite internet** (escluso Facebook)?

	Mai	Raramente	Qualche volta	Spesso	Molto spesso
a. Organizzare/partecipare ad un'iniziativa, riunione, manifestazione e/o protesta politica	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Formare/iscriversi ad un gruppo e/o un'organizzazione che si occupa di politica	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Sollecitare gli altri a sostenere o contrastare un particolare partito, candidato, e/o iniziativa politica	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Contattare un partito e/o candidato politico, un dipartimento governativo, e/o le amministrazioni locali	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Venire a conoscenza di un'iniziativa, riunione, manifestazione e/o protesta politica	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. Venire a conoscenza di un'iniziativa, riunione, manifestazione e/o protesta politica in cui ha poi partecipato	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g. Venire a conoscenza di un gruppo e/o un'organizzazione che si occupa di politica	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h. Prendere parte in discussioni politiche formali e informali	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i. Esprimere un giudizio politico (es. pubblicare/commentare un post riguardante la politica)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Attività politica offline

28. Non considerando Facebook ed internet, negli ultimi sei mesi quante volte ha svolto le seguenti attività?

	Mai	Raramente	Qualche volta	Spesso	Molto spesso
a. Organizzare/partecipare ad un'iniziativa, riunione, manifestazione e/o protesta politica	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Formare/iscriversi ad un gruppo e/o un'organizzazione che si occupa di politica	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Sollecitare gli altri a sostenere o contrastare un particolare partito, candidato, e/o iniziativa politica	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Contattare un partito e/o candidato politico, un dipartimento governativo, e/o le amministrazioni locali	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. Venire a conoscenza di un'iniziativa, riunione, manifestazione e/o protesta politica	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. Venire a conoscenza di un'iniziativa, riunione, manifestazione e/o protesta politica in cui ha poi partecipato	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
g. Venire a conoscenza di un gruppo e/o un'organizzazione che si occupa di politica	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
h. Prendere parte in discussioni politiche formali e informali	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
i. Esprimere un giudizio politico (es. commentare una notizia politica)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Appendix F – Questionnaire Coding Sheet

Q1 Are you?

- 1 Female
- 2 Male

Q2 What is your age?

- 1 18-24 years old
- 2 25-34 years old
- 3 35-44 years old
- 4 45-65 years old

Q3 What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- 1 Less than Upper Secondary Education
- 2 Upper Secondary Education
- 3 Post-Secondary Non-Tertiary Education
- 4 First Stage of Tertiary Education
- 5 Second Stage of Tertiary Education

Q4 What is your main job or occupation?

- 7 Large employer, manager and professional
- 6 Intermediate and lower supervisor
- 5 Small employer and own account worker
- 4 White collar worker (e.g. clerk)
- 3 Blue collar worker (e.g. labourer)
- 2 Unemployed
- 1 Student

Q5 How much time do you usually spend daily watching TV?

- 1 None at all
- 2 Less than 1 hour
- 3 1 to 3 hours
- 4 3 to 5 hours
- 5 More than 5 hours

Q6 How much time do you usually spend daily reading newspapers and/or magazines?

- 1 None at all
- 2 Less than 1 hour
- 3 1 to 3 hours
- 4 3 to 5 hours
- 5 More than 5 hours

Q7 How much time do you usually spend daily listening to the radio?

- 1 None at all
- 2 Less than 1 hour
- 3 1 to 3 hours
- 4 3 to 5 hours
- 5 More than 5 hours

**Q8 How much time do you usually spend daily on the Internet
(excluding Facebook)?**

- 1 None at all
- 2 Less than 1 hour
- 3 1 to 3 hours
- 4 3 to 5 hours
- 5 More than 5 hours

**Q9 In the last six months how often did you consume (read/listen/watch)
political news through the following media?**

Q9_a TV

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very Often

Q9_b Press

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very Often

Q9_c Radio

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very Often

Q9_d Internet (excluding Facebook)

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very Often

Q9_e Facebook

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very Often

Q10 How often do you follow what is going on in government and public affairs?

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

Q11 Generally speaking, you usually think of yourself as

- 1 Conservative/ Popolo della Libertà
- 2 Labour/Partito Democratico
- 3 Liberal Democrat/Terzo Polo
- 4 Other
- 5 No affiliation

Q12 What is your level of support for your preferred political party/movement?

- 1 Not strong at all
- 2 Not strong
- 3 Neither strong nor weak
- 4 Strong
- 5 Very strong
- 6 Not applicable

Q13 What political office is now held by Nick Clegg/Gianfranco Fini?

- 0 Prime Minister/Presidente della Repubblica
- 0 Chancellor of the Exchequer/Primo Ministro
- 1 Deputy Prime Minister/Presidente della Camera
- 0 Lord High Steward/ Presidente del Senato
- 0 I don't know

Q14 At the moment, who is the leader of the Labour Party/Partito Democratico?

- 0 Nick Clegg/Antonio di Pietro
- 0 Gordon Brown/Dario Franceschini
- 1 Ed Miliband/Pier Luigi Bersani
- 0 David Cameron/Silvio Berlusconi
- 0 I don't know

- Q15** **How many times can the House of Lords/
Presidente della Repubblica reject a bill within a year?**
- 0 Never
 - 0 One time
 - 1(IS)0 Two times
 - 1(BS)0 Three times
 - 0 I don't know
- Q16** **Which political party would you say is more right-wing?**
- 1 Conservative Party/Popolo della Libertà
 - 0 Labour Party/Partito Democratico
 - 0 Liberal Democrats/UDC
 - 0 Green Party/Italia dei Valori
 - 0 I don't know
- Q17** **At the moment, which party has the most members
in the House of Commons?**
- 1 Conservative Party/Popolo della Libertà
 - 0 Labour Party/Partito Democratico
 - 0 Liberal Democrats/UDC
 - 0 Green Party/Italia dei Valori
 - 0 I don't know
- Q18** **Public officials don't care about people like me.**
- 1 Strongly agree
 - 2 Agree
 - 3 Neither agree nor disagree
 - 4 Disagree
 - 5 Strongly disagree
- Q19** **Sometimes politics seems so complicated that a person like
me can't really understand it.**
- 1 Strongly agree
 - 2 Agree
 - 3 Neither agree nor disagree
 - 4 Disagree
 - 5 Strongly disagree
- Q20** **How much time do you usually spend daily on Facebook?**
- 1 Less than 1 hour
 - 2 1 to 3 hours
 - 3 3 to 5 hours
 - 4 More than 5 hours

- Q21 Facebook is part of my everyday activity.**
- 1 Strongly disagree
 - 2 Disagree
 - 3 Neither agree nor disagree
 - 4 Agree
 - 5 Strongly agree
- Q22 I feel out of touch when I haven't logged onto Facebook for a while.**
- 1 Strongly disagree
 - 2 Disagree
 - 3 Neither agree nor disagree
 - 4 Agree
 - 5 Strongly agree
- Q23 I feel I am part of the Facebook community.**
- 1 Strongly disagree
 - 2 Disagree
 - 3 Neither agree nor disagree
 - 4 Agree
 - 5 Strongly agree
- Q24 I would be sorry if Facebook closed down.**
- 1 Strongly disagree
 - 2 Disagree
 - 3 Neither agree nor disagree
 - 4 Agree
 - 5 Strongly agree
- Q25 In the last six months how often did you engage in the following activities through Facebook?**
- Q25_a Watching/listening/reading non-political news (e.g. sport)**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often
- Q25_b Posting/uploading non-political material (e.g. music videos)**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often

**Q25_c Visiting profiles of non-political actors or organisations
(e.g. celebrities)**

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

Q25_d Searching for non-political initiatives (e.g. concerts)

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

Q25_e Sharing information on non-political initiatives

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

Q25_f Contacting family and friends

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

Q25_g Non-political talk (e.g. gossip)

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

Q25_h Joining a non-political group (e.g. fan club)

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

Q25_i Organising non-political initiatives (e.g. nights out)

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

Q26 In the last six months how often did you engage in the following activities through Facebook?
Q26_a Organising/participating in a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

Q26_b Forming/joining a group or an organisation developed around politics

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

Q26_c Soliciting others to support or oppose a particular political party, candidate, and/or initiative

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

Q26_d Contacting a political party, candidate, government department and/or local council

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

Q26_e Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

- Q26_f Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest in which you took part**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often
- Q26_g Learning about a group or an organisation developed around politics**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often
- Q26_h Engaging in formal and informal political discussions**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often
- Q26_i Expressing a political opinion (e.g. publishing/commenting on a post concerning politics)**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often
- Q27 In the last six months how often did you engage in the following activities through the Internet (excluding Facebook)?**
- Q27_a Organising/participating in a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often
- Q27_b Forming/joining a group or an organisation developed around politics**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often

- Q27_c Soliciting others to support or oppose a particular political party, candidate, and/or initiative**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often
- Q27_d Contacting a political party, candidate, government department and/or local council**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often
- Q27_e Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often
- Q27_f Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest in which you took part**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often
- Q27_g Learning about a group or an organisation developed around politics**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often
- Q27_h Engaging in formal and informal political discussions**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often

- Q27_i Expressing a political opinion
(e.g. publishing/commenting on a post concerning politics)**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often
- Q28 In the last six months how often did you engage in the following activities through neither Facebook nor the Internet?**
- Q28_a Organising/participating in a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often
- Q28_b Forming/joining a group or an organisation developed around politics**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often
- Q28_c Soliciting others to support or oppose a particular political party, candidate, and/or initiative**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often
- Q28_d Contacting a political party, candidate, government department and/or local council**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often
- Q28_e Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally and/or protest**
- 1 Never
 - 2 Rarely
 - 3 Sometimes
 - 4 Often
 - 5 Very often

**Q28_f Learning about a political initiative, meeting, rally
and/or protest in which you took part**

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

Q28_g Learning about a group or an organisation developed around politics

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

Q28_h Engaging in formal and informal political discussions

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

Q28_i Expressing a political opinion (e.g. commenting on a piece of news)

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very often

Appendix G – Interview Guide

As anticipated in Section 4.6, an interview guide listing the main issues to be explored during the interviews was developed (see the attached CD for the interviews transcripts).

Political Participation:

- Description of participation in political activities on Facebook, on the Internet and offline
- Reasons behind participants' various levels of political participation on Facebook, on the Internet and offline
- Links between Facebook, Internet and offline political participation
- Increase/decline of political engagement and political participation due to Facebook activity
- Differences between Facebook, Internet and offline political participation
- Reasons behind the preference for/opposition to a specific participation channel(s)
- Contributions of Facebook to political participation

Mobilisation Activities

- Description of participation in political mobilisation activities on Facebook, on the Internet and offline
- Reasons behind participants' various levels of mobilisation activities on Facebook, on the Internet and offline
- Links between Facebook, Internet and offline mobilisation activities
- Differences/similarities between Facebook, the Internet and the offline world as political mobilisation channels
- Reasons behind the preference for/opposition to a specific mobilisation channel(s)
- Nature of Facebook mobilisation (i.e., single-issue or political organisations)
- Contributions of Facebook to political mobilisation

Communication Activities

- Description of consumption of political information on Facebook, on the Internet and offline
- Reasons behind participants' various levels of consumption of political information on Facebook, on the Internet and offline
- Description of participation in political discussion on Facebook, on the Internet and offline

- Reasons behind participants' various levels of political discussion on Facebook, on the Internet and offline
- Links between Facebook, Internet and offline political communication activities and political mobilisations ones
- Reasons behind the preference for/opposition to a specific political information and media source(s)
- Differences/similarities between Facebook, other online and offline information sources
- Nature of sources of Facebook political information (e.g., friends, political organisations, traditional media, alternative media, etc.)
- Trustworthiness of political information from the various media channels
- Reasons behind the preference for/opposition to a specific political discussion platform(s)
- Differences/similarities between Facebook, other online and offline political discussion
- Quality and tones of Facebook, Internet and offline political discussion (e.g., productive discussion, fact-based discussion, quarrels, uncivil tones, etc.)
- Nature of Facebook, Internet and offline discussants (e.g., friends, friends of friends, or strangers)
- Exposure to political difference on Facebook, the Internet and offline
- Dynamics of exposure to political information on Facebook, the Internet and offline (i.e., actively searching for information or accidentally exposed to information)
- Contributions of Facebook to the consumption of political information
- Contributions of Facebook to political discussion

Facebook Usage

- Description of Facebook usage
- Reasons behind participants' various levels of Facebook usage
- Most common Facebook non-political activities
- Nature of social network (e.g., number of friends, types of friends – real life friends, online friends, friends of friends, strangers; homogeneous or heterogeneous political backgrounds, etc.)
- Links between Facebook usage(s) and political participation
- Perception and relevance of Facebook
- Contributions of Facebook to one's life

Appendix H – Thematic Analysis

As explained in Section 4.6.3, the interviews were analysed through a thematic analysis. Table H1 shows the process behind the development of the various codes through which the qualitative data were organised (i.e., theory-driven coding, quantitative data-driven, and qualitative data-driven), while Table H2 indicates how the various codes have informed the identified themes.

Table H1 – Thematic Analysis: Code Development

Cluster	Thematic Categories	Codes	Coding
<u>FACEBOOK</u> <u>USAGE</u>	Relevance of Facebook	1. A key tool in people's lives	Quantitative data-driven: Samples' high/moderate scores on the Facebook perceived relevance scale
		2. Replacing other online platforms	Qualitative data-driven
		3. Limited importance in people's lives	Qualitative data-driven
		4. Most used online platform	Qualitative data-driven
		5. Using other online platforms instead of Facebook	Qualitative data-driven
		6. Used in combination with other online platforms	Qualitative data-driven
	Factors limiting Facebook activity	7. Privacy concerns limiting Facebook activity	Theory-driven: Section 2.3 and 2.4 – privacy paradox
		8. Digital skills reducing Facebook activity	Qualitative data-driven
		9. Older people less active on Facebook	Theory-driven: Section 2.2 – digital divide
		10. Dislike of Facebook as a company	Theory-driven: Section 2.4 – exploiting users' information
		11. Facebook as a time-waster	Qualitative data-driven
		12. Dislike of some Facebook contacts	Qualitative data-driven
		13. Preference for other online platforms	Qualitative data-driven
		14. Preference for offline based relationship and interaction	Qualitative data-driven

Table H1 – Thematic Analysis: Code Development (continued from the previous page)

Cluster	Thematic Categories	Codes	Coding
<u>FACEBOOK</u> <u>USAGE</u>	Factors promoting Facebook activity	15. Everybody is on Facebook	Qualitative data-driven
		16. Everything is in one place	Qualitative data-driven
		17. Easier to keep in touch with people	Theory-driven: Section 2.3 – facilitating the management of social relationships
		18. Being constantly updated on what happens around you	Qualitative data-driven
		19. Enjoyment of the variety of information and people found on Facebook	Qualitative data-driven
		20. Improvement of social life	Qualitative data-driven
	Various usages of Facebook	21. Facebook as a light-hearted platform	Quantitative data-driven: Samples' higher levels of Facebook non-political activity when compared to their Facebook political participation
		22. Used only for politics	Qualitative data-driven
		23. Different usages according to different levels of political engagement	Qualitative data-driven
		24. Not one favourite usage	Quantitative data-driven: Samples' similar scores on the various Facebook non-political usage dimensions
		25. Information usage	Theory-driven: See Section 2.4 – various usages of Facebook
		26. Entertainment usage	Theory-driven: See Section 2.4 – various usages of Facebook
		27. Communication usage	Theory-driven: See Section 2.4 – various usages of Facebook
		28. Relationship maintenance	Theory-driven: See Section 2.4 – various usages of Facebook
		29. Work and study-related usage	Qualitative data-driven

Table H1 – Thematic Analysis: Code Development (continued from the previous page)

Cluster	Thematic Categories	Codes	Coding
<u>POLITICAL PARTICIPATION</u>	Relevance of Facebook as a political platform	30. Most used political platform	Quantitative data-driven: IPs' higher scores on Facebook political participation compared to Internet and offline political participation
		31. Used in combination with other online platforms for political purposes	Quantitative data-driven: BPs' higher scores on Internet political participation compared to Facebook political participation
		32. Using other online platforms instead of Facebook for political purposes	Qualitative data-driven
		33. Growing importance of Facebook as a political platform	Qualitative data-driven
		34. Limited importance of Facebook as a political platform	Quantitative data-driven: Samples' limited scores on Facebook political participation
		35. A further venue for politically active individuals	Theory-driven: Section 3.1 – reinforcement thesis
		36. Not relevant to users with limited levels of political participation	Theory-driven: Section 3.1 – reinforcement thesis
	Advantages of Facebook as a political participation platform	37. Possibility of participating at any time and from anywhere	Qualitative data-driven
		38. Reducing the thresholds of participation	Theory-driven: Section 3.1 – mobilisation thesis
		39. Possibility of learning more about politics	Qualitative data-driven
		40. Facebook as a more informal venue for political participation	Qualitative data-driven
		41. Emergence of new forms of participation (e.g., contacting politicians on Facebook)	Theory-driven: Section 3.1 – mobilisation thesis
		42. Increase in requests for participation	Qualitative data-driven
		43. Promoting the participation of previously politically inactive users	Theory-driven: Section 3.1 – mobilisation thesis

Table H1 – Thematic Analysis: Code Development (continued from the previous page)

Cluster	Thematic Categories	Codes	Coding
<u>POLITICAL PARTICIPATION</u>	Advantages of Facebook as a political participation platform	44. Facebook leading to offline political participation	Quantitative data-driven: Large correlations between Facebook and offline political participation
		45. Facebook leading to political participation on other online platforms	Quantitative data-driven: Large correlations between Facebook and Internet political participation
	Limitations of Facebook as a political participation platform	46. Participating on Facebook does not change anything	Theory-driven: Section 3.1 – drawing citizens away from more meaningful forms of participation
		47. Politics is not important on Facebook	Qualitative data-driven
		48. Expressing political views on Facebook can endanger social relationships	Qualitative data-driven
		49. Expressing political views on Facebook can impact negatively on offline life (e.g., losing job opportunities)	Qualitative data-driven
		50. Only politically active people take advantage of Facebook	Theory-driven: Section 3.1 – reinforcement thesis
		51. People who are not on Facebook are excluded	Theory-driven: Section 2.2 – digital divide
		52. People with limited digital skills are excluded	Theory-driven: Section 2.2 – digital divide
		53. Old people have less chances to participate	Theory-driven: Section 2.2 – digital divide
<u>POLITICAL MOBILISATION</u>	Relevance of Facebook as a political mobilisation platform	54. The most used political platform by activists	Qualitative data-driven
		55. A key tool for the organisation of political initiatives	Theory-driven: Section 3.4 – SNSs as key organisational tools
		56. Replacing other organisation and communication tools	Qualitative data-driven
		57. Combined with other online platforms for political mobilisation	Qualitative data-driven
		58. Very limited impact on citizens' political mobilisation	Quantitative data-driven: Samples' very limited scores on Facebook political mobilisation
		59. Used mainly for political communication	Quantitative data-driven: Samples' higher scores on Facebook political communication

Table H1 – Thematic Analysis: Code Development (continued from the previous page)

Cluster	Thematic Categories	Codes	Coding
<u>POLITICAL MOBILISATION</u>	Relevance of Facebook as a political mobilisation platform	60. No point in participating in political initiatives	Qualitative data-driven
		61. Preference for offline mobilisation	Qualitative data-driven
	Advantages of Facebook as a political mobilisation platform	62. Learning about more political initiatives	Qualitative data-driven
		63. Mobilisation does not depend anymore on political institutions	Qualitative data-driven
		64. Possibility of supporting a wide range of causes	Qualitative data-driven
		65. Possibility of supporting causes relevant to the individual	Theory-driven: Section 1.2 – lifestyle politics
		66. Possibility of connecting with the offline-local dimension	Qualitative data-driven
		67. Facilitating the organisation of political initiatives	Qualitative data-driven
		68. Facilitating communication among activists	Qualitative data-driven
		69. Increasing the reach of political initiatives	Qualitative data-driven
		70. Possibility of increasing awareness around a political initiative	Qualitative data-driven
	Limitations of Facebook as a political mobilisation platform	71. Meaningful only if used in support of offline activities	Qualitative data-driven
		72. Cannot be used in isolation – needs to be combined with other tools	Qualitative data-driven
		73. Whoever is not on Facebook is often excluded from political initiatives	Theory-driven: Section 2.2 – digital divide
		74. Limited impact on political process	Theory-driven: Section 3.4 – clicktivism
		75. Too many causes to support	Theory-driven: Section 3.2 – information overload
		76. Issues with the credibility of the various causes	Qualitative data-driven

Table H1 – Thematic Analysis: Code Development (continued from the previous page)

Cluster	Thematic Categories	Codes	Coding
<u>POLITICAL INFORMATION</u>	Relevance of Facebook as a political information source	77. Most used political information source	Quantitative data-driven: IPs' higher scores on Facebook political information compared to offline and Internet political information
		78. Used in combination with other online political information sources	Quantitative data-driven: BPs' higher scores on Internet political information compared to Facebook political information
		79. Using other online political information sources instead of Facebook	Qualitative data-driven
		80. Growing importance of Facebook as a political information source	Theory-driven: Section 3.2 – values of SNSs as political information sources
		81. Preference for mainstream media	Qualitative data-driven
		82. Preferred to mainstream media	Quantitative data-driven: IPs' low scores on offline political information
		83. Preference of other online sources	Quantitative data-driven: BPs' higher scores on Internet political information compared to Facebook political information
	Advantages of Facebook as a political information source	84. Free from the influence of media and political institutions	Qualitative data-driven
		85. Possibility of obtaining information from a wide variety of sources	Theory-driven: Section 3.2 – proliferation of information sources
		86. Possibility of fostering political interest	Qualitative data-driven
		87. Leading users to search for further information	Qualitative data-driven
		88. Information coming from other citizens	Theory-driven: Section 3.2 – information exuberance
		89. Being constantly updated	Qualitative data-driven
		90. Presence of both mainstream and alternative political information sources	Qualitative data-driven
		91. No need to search for information	Qualitative data-driven
		92. Obtaining information impossible to find through more traditional channels	Qualitative data-driven

Table H1 – Thematic Analysis: Code Development (continued from the previous page)

Cluster	Thematic Categories	Codes	Coding
<u>POLITICAL INFORMATION</u>	Advantages of Facebook as a political information source	93. Obtaining more trustworthy political information	Qualitative data-driven
		94. Obtaining more political information	Qualitative data-driven
	Limitations of Facebook as a political information source	95. Abundance of bogus information	Qualitative data driven
		96. Too much information	Theory-driven: Section 2.2 – information overload
		97. Information coming from mainstream media is more trustworthy	Qualitative data driven
	Selective exposure	98. Consuming pro-attitudinal political information	Theory-driven: Section 3.2 – selective exposure
		99. Obtaining politically diverse information	Qualitative data-driven
		100. Direct selection of political information	Theory-driven: Section 3.2 – pro-active selection typical of new media
		101. Accidental exposure to political information	Theory-driven: Section 3.2 – inadvertency thesis
		102. More political difference on Facebook	Qualitative data-driven
		103. More political difference on other online platforms	Qualitative data-driven
		104. More political difference offline	Theory-driven: Section 3.2 – the Internet offering the conditions most conducive to selective exposure
		105. More selective exposure on other online platforms	Qualitative data-driven
		106. More selective exposure offline	Qualitative data-driven
		107. No difference among the various information sources in terms of exposure to political difference	Qualitative data-driven

Table H1 – Thematic Analysis: Code Development (continued from the previous page)

Cluster	Thematic Categories	Codes	Coding
<u>POLITICAL DISCUSSION</u>	Relevance of Facebook as a political discussion platform	108. Most used political discussion platform	Qualitative data-driven
		109. Combined with other online political discussion platforms	Qualitative data-driven
		110. Using other online discussion platforms instead of Facebook	Qualitative data-driven
		111. Growing relevance of Facebook as a discussion platform	Quantitative data-driven: Samples' same scores on Facebook and offline political discussion
		112. Replacing other online discussion platforms	Quantitative data-driven: Samples' higher scores on Facebook political discussion compared to Internet political discussion
		113. Preference for offline political discussion	Qualitative data-driven
		114. Preference for Facebook political discussion	Qualitative data-driven
		115. Preference for other online political discussion platforms	Qualitative data-driven
	Advantages of Facebook as a political discussion platform	116. Involving more participants	Qualitative data-driven
		117. Discussing with a wider range of people than offline	Theory-driven: Section 3.3 – discussing with geographically distant interlocutors
		118. Discussing with a wider range of people than on other online platforms	Qualitative data-driven
		119. Discussing with a more politically diverse range of people than offline	Qualitative data-driven
		120. Discussing with a more politically diverse range of people than on other online platforms	Qualitative data-driven
		121. Possibility of engaging in political discussion at any time	Theory-driven: Section 3.3 – flexibility of online political discussion
		122. More political discussion	Qualitative data-driven
		123. Learning new information	Qualitative data-driven
		124. More honesty online	Qualitative data-driven
		125. Absence of physical cues contributing to honesty	Qualitative data-driven

Table H1 – Thematic Analysis: Code Development (continued from the previous page)

Cluster	Thematic Categories	Codes	Coding
<u>POLITICAL DISCUSSION</u>	Limitations of Facebook as a political discussion platform	126. Enjoyment of the physical element of face-to-face discussion	Qualitative data-driven
		127. Online discussion more aggressive than offline discussion	Theory-driven: Section 3.3 – flaming
		128. Absence of physical contact leading to more aggressive tones	Qualitative data-driven
		129. Discussing only with like-minded individuals	Theory-driven: Section 3.3 – echo-chambers
		130. Possibility of being harassed by people holding a different political view	Qualitative data-driven
		131. Possibility of people interfering in a discussion	Qualitative data-driven
		132. Possibility of people ruining a discussion	Theory-driven: Section 3.3 – trolls
		133. Presence of identity attributes limiting the honesty of a discussion	Qualitative data-driven
		134. If a mistake is made greater possibility of receiving criticism	Qualitative data-driven
		135. Semi-public nature of Facebook posts limiting the topics of discussions	Theory-driven: Section 2.3 – blurring of the private and the public

The codes listed in Table H1 were examined, relationships among them sought, their links with the RQs considered, and relevant themes identified.

Table H2 – Thematic Analysis: From Codes to Themes

Cluster	Themes	Codes
<u>FACEBOOK USAGE</u>	Importance of Facebook in people's lives	1, 2, 4, 6, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 54, 77, 82, 108,
	Negative perception of Facebook	3, 5, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 34, 61, 76, 79, 81, 95, 97, 110, 113, 115
	Facebook replacing other Internet tools	2, 6, 30, 31, 33, 54, 55, 56, 57, 77, 78, 80, 108, 111, 112
	Facebook as an all-encompassing platform	24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 33, 54, 55, 77, 80, 108, 111
	Mainly non-political usage	7, 8, 21, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 32, 34, 47, 58, 79, 81, 110, 113, 115
	Mainly political usage by highly politically active users	22, 23, 30, 35, 36, 50, 54, 55, 56, 57, 77, 80, 82, 108, 111, 114,
<u>POLITICAL PARTICIPATION</u>	Facebook as main online political platform	1, 2, 4, 22, 30, 33, 54, 55, 56, 77, 80, 82, 108, 111, 112
	Political relevance of other online platforms and websites	5, 6, 21, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31, 32, 34, 57, 58, 78, 83, 109, 110, 115
	Involving new participants	15, 16, 17, 18, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 59, 64, 67, 69, 70, 86, 87, 88, 89, 91, 92, 94, 101, 116, 117, 121, 122, 123,
	Facilitating participation	15, 16, 17, 18, 37, 38, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 64, 67, 68, 69, 88, 89, 91, 92, 94, 121, 122
	Bringing politics into everyday life	37, 38, 39, 40, 42, 88, 89, 91, 94, 101, 121, 122
	Virtuous circle	25, 27, 39, 42, 43, 44, 45, 59, 70, 77, 80, 82, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 91, 92, 94, 101, 121, 122, 123
	Facebook usage gap	5, 8, 9, 32, 34, 51, 52, 53, 72, 73, 81, 113
	Need of digital skills	8, 9, 34, 52, 53, 72, 81, 113
	Relevance of privacy concerns	7, 32, 34, 48, 49, 133, 134, 135
	Relevance of political interest	22, 23, 30, 34, 35, 36, 39, 42, 50, 54, 58, 77, 86, 94, 100, 101, 108
	Relevance of political knowledge and internal political efficacy	25, 34, 39, 42, 62, 64, 68, 69, 70, 85, 86, 88, 89, 91, 92, 94, 100, 101, 123, 134
	Relevance of external political efficacy	34, 46, 58, 59, 60, 63, 74, 76
	Relevance of affiliation to a party or movement	22, 23, 30, 35, 50, 54, 66, 67, 68, 69, 71, 77, 80, 108, 11
	Relevance of the amount of Facebook usage	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 24, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 39, 42, 43, 44, 45, 54, 55, 56, 57, 62, 63, 65, 69, 70, 77, 78, 79, 80, 82, 86, 87, 88, 89, 91, 92, 94, 100, 101, 108, 109, 1010, 1111, 112, 121, 122, 123
	Lack of time inhibiting participation	21, 23, 34, 36, 38, 37, 41, 43, 62, 67, 74, 89, 91, 121, 122

Table H2 – Thematic Analysis: From Codes to Themes (continued from previous page)

Cluster	Themes	Codes
<u>POLITICAL INFORMATION</u>	The flexibility and speed of online information	25, 37, 39, 42, 59, 67, 68, 69, 77, 82, 84, 88, 89, 91, 92, 94, 100, 101, 116, 117, 121, 122, 123
	The variety of online sources	19, 25, 39, 42, 77, 80, 82, 83, 84, 85, 88, 89, 90, 92, 94, 99, 102, 103, 116, 117, 119, 122, 123
	The interactive nature of online information	25, 45, 62, 64, 66, 69, 70, 77, 78, 82, 83, 85, 87, 88, 89, 91, 100, 101, 116, 117
	Facebook and proliferation of sources	1, 15, 16, 19, 25, 39, 42, 55, 62, 64, 65, 66, 67, 69, 70, 75, 77, 80, 82, 85, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 94, 96, 99, 100, 101, 102, 116, 117, 118, 119, 122, 123
	The networked nature of Facebook information	15, 16, 18, 25, 38, 39, 42, 62, 65, 66, 69, 70, 77, 80, 85, 87, 88, 89, 91, 94, 100, 101, 102, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 122, 123
	Viral information on Facebook	15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 25, 37, 38, 39, 42, 44, 45, 54, 55, 62, 66, 69, 70, 77, 80, 85, 86, 87, 88, 91, 92, 94, 99, 101, 102, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 122, 123, 131
	Facebook as activator of the information search process	15, 16, 18, 19, 25, 39, 42, 45, 62, 64, 65, 66, 70, 77, 80, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 100, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 122
	Issues of credibility of Facebook political information	3, 5, 6, 11, 12, 13, 21, 25, 26, 34, 42, 47, 58, 61, 62, 74, 75, 76, 78, 79, 81, 83, 85, 88, 95, 96, 97, 117, 118
	Exposure to pro-attitudinal political information	22, 25, 35, 39, 42, 59, 62, 64, 65, 70, 77, 80, 85, 92, 94, 98, 100, 101, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 122
	Exposure to political difference on Facebook	15, 17, 18, 19, 22, 25, 39, 42, 43, 59, 64, 69, 70, 77, 80, 82, 85, 87, 88, 89, 91, 92, 94, 96, 99, 100, 101, 102, 105, 106, 107, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 122, 123
	Exposure to political difference through active selection	15, 17, 19, 22, 23, 25, 35, 39, 42, 59, 64, 77, 80, 85, 87, 94, 99, 100, 102, 105, 106, 107
	Accidental exposure to political difference	15, 17, 18, 19, 21, 23, 27, 28, 29, 38, 39, 42, 43, 44, 45, 62, 80, 85, 86, 88, 89, 91, 92, 94, 99, 102, 105, 106, 107, 131
	Interaction and exposure to political difference	15, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 27, 28, 35, 39, 50, 59, 80, 88, 91, 94, 99, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 116, 119, 120, 122
	Presence of established media institutions on Facebook	25, 31, 39, 45, 75, 76, 77, 78, 81, 82, 83, 90, 94, 95, 97, 100
	Facebook as source of alternative information	22, 25, 30, 39, 42, 44, 45, 55, 57, 62, 64, 65, 69, 70, 77, 80, 82, 84, 85, 89, 90, 92, 93, 94, 100, 122, 123
	Negative perception of established media institutions	22, 25, 30, 44, 45, 62, 64, 65, 69, 70, 77, 80, 82, 84, 85, 89, 90, 92, 93, 94, 100
	Support for established media institutions	21, 31, 32, 34, 46, 47, 75, 76, 78, 79, 81, 90, 95, 96, 97

Table H2 – Thematic Analysis: From Codes to Themes (continued from previous page)

Cluster	Themes	Codes
<u>POLITICAL MOBILISATION</u>	Low efficacy of political initiatives	34, 46, 58, 59, 60, 63, 74, 75, 76
	More communication than mobilisation	23, 33, 34, 39, 46, 58, 59, 60, 61, 71, 74, 76, 77, 80, 82, 86, 89, 91, 92, 94, 100, 101, 108, 111, 114, 121, 122
	Growing relevance of Facebook in activists' repertoires	23, 35, 54, 55, 56, 62, 63, 64, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70
	Promoting grassroots single-issue mobilisation	40, 41, 42, 44, 45, 54, 55, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 69, 70, 88, 92
	More information on political initiatives	39, 42, 54, 55, 59, 62, 64, 67, 69, 70, 75, 77, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 94, 100, 101, 116, 117, 118, 121, 122, 123
	Bypassing traditional mobilisation channels	40, 41, 42, 54, 55, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 69, 70, 84, 85, 88, 90, 92, 94, 122
	Detachment from traditional politics	34, 40, 46, 58, 59, 60, 63, 65, 74, 82, 84, 85, 88, 92, 93
	Interdependence between Facebook and offline political participation	23, 42, 44, 50, 54, 55, 61, 62, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72
<u>POLITICAL DISCUSSION</u>	Flexibility and exposure to political information	15, 16, 18, 30, 33, 37, 38, 39, 40, 42, 43, 62, 67, 68, 69, 70, 77, 80, 85, 86, 88, 89, 91, 92, 94, 108, 111, 114, 116, 121, 122, 123,
	Expanding and diversifying the discussion network	15, 17, 19, 27, 28, 99, 108, 111, 114, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122
	A more politically diverse discussion network	19, 27, 28, 99, 102, 108, 111, 114, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123
	Limited control over discussion and its participants	101, 113, 115, 116, 117, 118, 121, 122, 131, 132
	Harsher and more aggressive tones online	113, 115, 126, 127, 128, 130, 131, 132, 134
	More honesty and participation in online discussion	114, 115, 119, 120, 122, 124, 125, 128, 131, 133, 135

Appendix I – Ethical Approval Form



Queen Margaret University

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APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL **FOR A RESEARCH PROJECT 2010/11**

This is an application form for ethical approval to undertake a piece of research. Ethical approval must be gained for any piece of research to be undertaken by any student or member of staff of QMU. Approval must also be gained by any external researcher who wishes to use Queen Margaret students or staff as participants in their research.

Please note, before any requests for volunteers can be distributed, through the moderator service, or externally, this form **MUST** be submitted (completed, with signatures) to the Secretary to the Research Ethics Panel.

You should read QMU's chapter on "Research Ethics: Regulations, Procedures, and Guidelines" before completing the form. This is available at:

<http://www.qmu.ac.uk/quality/rs/default.htm>

Hard copies are available from the Secretary to the Research Ethics Panel.

The person who completes this form (the applicant) will normally be the Principal Investigator (in the case of staff research) or the student (in the case of student research). In other cases of collaborative research, e.g. an undergraduate group project, one member should be given responsibility for applying for ethical approval. For class exercises involving research, the module coordinator should complete the application and secure approval.

The completed form should be typed rather than handwritten. Electronic signatures should be used and the form should be submitted electronically wherever possible.

Applicant details

1. Researcher's name: Isidoropaulo Casteltrione
2. Researcher's contact email address: ICasteltrione@qmu.ac.uk
3. Category of researcher (please tick and enter title of programme of study as appropriate):

QMU undergraduate student	
Title of programme:	
QMU postgraduate student – taught degree	
Title of programme:	
QMU postgraduate student – research degree	PhD
QMU staff member – research degree	
QMU staff member – other research	
Other (please specify)	

4. School: School of Arts, Social Sciences and Management
5. Subject Area: Political Communication and Media
6. Name of Supervisor or Director of Studies (if applicable): Dr Magda Pieczka
7. Names and affiliations of all other researcher who will be working on the project: None

Research details

8. Title of study: Facebook and Political Participation: Self-presentation, Communication and Mobilisation
9. Expected start date: February 2012
10. Expected end date: August 2012
11. Details of any financial support for the project from outside QMU: None
12. Please detail the aims and objectives of this study (max. 400 words)

This research investigates the contributions of Facebook to political participation. More specifically, it aims to establish how different types of political activities have been influenced by the rise of this particular social networking website. In addition, this research seeks to assess whether Facebook tends to promote to a greater degree the participation of already politically active and engaged citizens rather than the participation of politically inactive/less active audiences. This is a cross-national comparative study between Italy and the United Kingdom and it addresses the contributions of Facebook to citizens' political participation.

Methodology

13. Research procedures to be used: *please tick all that apply.*

	Tick if applicable
Questionnaires (<i>please attach copies of all questionnaires to be used</i>)	X
Interviews (<i>please attach summary of topics to be explored</i>)	X
Focus groups (<i>please attach summary of topics to be explored / copies of materials to be used</i>)	
Experimental / Laboratory techniques (<i>please include full details under question 14</i>)	
Use of email / Internet as a means of data collection (<i>please include full details under question 14</i>)	X
Use of questionnaires / other materials that are subject to copyright (<i>please include full details under question 14 and confirm that the materials have been / will be purchased for your use</i>)	
Use of biomedical procedures to obtain blood or tissue samples (<i>please include full details under question 14 and include subject area risk assessment forms, where appropriate</i>)	
Other technique / procedure (<i>please include full details under question 14</i>)	

14. Briefly outline the nature of the research and the methods and procedures to be used (max. 400 words).

Research method:

This research will adopt a Mixed Methods approach which combines or associates both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Among the various Mixed Methods strategies this study will employ a sequential-explanatory one, characterised by the collection and analysis of quantitative data in the first phase and the collection and analysis of qualitative data in the second one for a more detailed exploration.

Web-survey:

In the first phase, a web-based survey will investigate citizens' political participation and the links between this phenomenon and a number of different variables (i.e., media usage, Facebook usage, and political engagement).

The website hosting the survey will be: www.survey.bris.ac.uk

It will take approximately 14 minutes to complete the web survey.

Interview:

Information from the first phase will be further explored in the second qualitative phase, where a series of semi-structured interviews will be held in order to better understand quantitative results.

The interviews will be carried out through either telephone or Skype at a time indicated by the participants. Each interview will last approximately 1 hour.

15. Does your research include the use of people as participants? *Please delete as appropriate.* **Yes**
16. Does your research include the experimental use of live animals? *Please delete as appropriate.* **No**
17. Does your research involve experimenting on plant or animal matter, or inorganic matter? *Please delete as appropriate.* **No**
18. Does your research include the analysis of documents, or of material in non-print media, other than those which are freely available for public access? *Please delete as appropriate.* **No**
19. **If you answered ‘Yes’ to question 18**, give a description of the material you intend to use. Describe its ownership, your rights of access to it, the permissions required to access it and any ways in which personal identities might be revealed or personal information might be disclosed. Describe any measures you will take to safeguard the anonymity of sources, where this is relevant:
20. Will any restriction be placed on the publication of results? *Please delete as appropriate.* **No**
21. **If you answered ‘Yes’ to question 20**, give details and provide a reasoned justification for the restrictions. (See Research Ethics Guidelines Section 2, paragraph 7)
22. Will anyone except the named researchers have access to the data collected? *Please delete as appropriate.* **No**
23. Please give details of how and where data will be stored, and how long it will be retained for before being destroyed. (See Research Ethics Guidelines Section 1, paragraph 2.4.1)

The only personal data collected from the participants will be their e-mail addresses or their Facebook user-names. Such details are required to trace the identity of the winner once the draw has been carried out and to limit the risk of people mischievously completing the survey more than once in order to have a better chance to be selected in the draw. In order to ensure confidentiality, the collected data and the report findings will be anonymised by removing all labels and titles that can lead to identification and through the allocation of pseudonyms. This procedure will be carried out once the research project has been completed. Special care will be taken to store data safely. A safe storage system only accessible to the researcher has already been set up. Following Queen Margaret University’s Data Protection guidelines, participants’ information will be computerised and password protected.

24. Please highlight what you see as the most important ethical issues this study raises (eg. adverse physical or psychological reactions; addressing a sensitive topic area; risk of loss of confidentiality; other ethical issue. If you do not think this study raises any ethical issues, please explain why).

An issue could be related to the transparency of the random draw assigning the £30 vouchers/top-ups. In order to deal with this possible issue a QMU member of staff who is not involved in the project will assist the researcher in the draw.

Considering participants' control over their participation in the study I could not identify any other potential ethical issues.

25. If you have identified any ethical issues associated with this study, please explain how the potential benefits of the research outweigh any potential harms (e.g., by benefiting participants; by improving research skills; other potential benefit).

This research will benefit citizens in that:

- It will make citizens aware of the existence and effectiveness of a tool through which to fulfill their duties as citizens (i.e., indicating to governments which policies to pursue and engaging in the political process).
- It will provide a possible solution to reverse the negative participatory trends characterising Western democracies.

In addition, once completed the study a summary of the results will be published on the microsite developed for this project. In this way participants will be able to see the outcome of their contribution.

This research will also benefit academia:

- It will contribute to the academic literature on the impact of Internet on political participation and in particular to the ongoing and academic debate on the capacity of this medium to promote the participation of individuals such as young people or isolated citizens who are traditionally less politically active.
- By focusing exclusively on Facebook and on a wide range of political activities in Italy and the UK mainly during a non-electoral period, this study will venture into uncharted territory and generate new knowledge.

Protection for the Researcher

26. Will the researcher be at risk of sustaining either physical or psychological harm as a result of the research? *Please delete as appropriate.* **No**

27. If you answered 'Yes' to question 26, please give details of potential risks and the precautions which will be taken to protect the researcher.

Research Involving Human Participants

You should only complete this section if you have indicated above that your research will involve human participants.

- 28.** Please indicate the total number of participants you intend to recruit for this study from each participant group:

Participant Group	Please state total number
QMU students	
QMU staff	
Members of the public from outside QMU	Approximately 400
NHS patients	
NHS employees	
Children (under 18 years of age)	
People in custody	
People with communication or learning difficulties	
People with mental health issues	
People engaged in illegal activities (eg. illegal drug use)	
Other (please specify):	

** Please declare in section 32 where the participant group may necessitate the need for standard or enhanced disclosure check*

- 29.** Please state any inclusion or exclusion criteria to be used. (See Research Ethics Guidelines Section 1, paragraph 2.4)

Participants will have to be British/Italian citizens between the age of 18 and 65 and Facebook users. Underage users have been excluded in order to avoid ethical issues, while the 65+ year-olds have not been considered as they represent a very small fraction of the total Facebook population, and finding participants fitting within this category could prove particularly problematic.

- 30.** Please give details of how participants will be recruited:

Announcements will be posted on several Facebook groups.

- 31.** Please describe how informed consent will be obtained from participants. (See Research Ethics Guidelines Section 1, paragraphs 2.1.2 – 2.1.5)

A website has been created in order to provide participants with information on Queen Margaret University, the research project, the research team, the study's participants, data protection and the rewards. The link to the website has been included in the recruitment ad and in the welcome page of the questionnaire. Informed consent will be obtained through a page inserted just after the welcome page. Below you can see the content of the page:

I have read and understood the provided information.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions about my participation.

I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in this study.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this study at any stage without giving any reason.

I agree to participate in this study.

Continue

32. Ethical Principles incorporated into the study (*please tick as applicable*):

	<i>Tick as applicable</i>
Will participants be offered a written explanation of the research?	X
Will participants be offered an oral explanation of the research?	
Will participants sign a consent form?	
Will oral consent be obtained from participants?	
Will participants be offered the opportunity to decline to take part?	X
Will participants be informed that participation is voluntary?	X
Will participants be offered the opportunity to withdraw at any stage without giving a reason?	X
Will independent expert advice be available if required?	
Will participants be informed that there may be no benefit to them in taking part?	
Will participants be guaranteed confidentiality?	X
Will participants be guaranteed anonymity?	X
Will the participant group necessitate a standard or enhanced disclosure check?	
Will the provisions of the Data Protection Act be met?	X
Has safe data storage been secured?	X
Will the researcher(s) be free to publish the findings of the research?	X
If the research involves deception, will an explanation be offered following participation?	
If the research involves questionnaires, will the participants be informed that they may omit items they do not wish to answer?	
If the research involves interviews, will the participants be informed that they do not have to answer questions, and do not have to give an explanation for this?	X
Will participants be offered any payment or reward, beyond reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses?	X

33. Risk Assessment



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Reference:	
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School/Dept:		Location:		Date	
Assessed by:		Job Title:		Signature	
Activity / Task:		Total Number exposed to risk		Review Date	

Ref no.	Hazards	People at risk					Likelihood				Severity				Total risk	Existing control measures	Adequate controls?
		employees and students	Members of staff	Contractors	Young people	Members new or returning	Improbable	Remote	Possible	Probable	No injury	Minor	Major	Fatal			
1.	No hazards identified																
2.																	
3.																	
4.																	
5.																	
Risk value (RV)							1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4			

Total risk = Likelihood (RV) x Severity (RV) Total risk of 1 – 4 = 'L', low risk Total risk of 6 – 9 = 'M', medium risk
Total risk of 12 – 16 = 'H', high risk



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Reference:	
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Remedial action required

Ref no.	Action required	Target date	Action by:	Date completed
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				

Declarations


34. Having completed all the relevant items of this form and, if appropriate, having attached the Information Sheet and Consent Form plus any other relevant documentation as indicated below, complete the statement below.

- I have read Queen Margaret University's document on "Research Ethics: Regulations, Procedures, and Guidelines".
- In my view this research is:

See Research Ethics Guidelines Section 6	Please tick
Non-invasive	X
Minor invasive using an established procedure at QMU	
Minor invasive using a NEW procedure at QMU	
Major invasive	

- I request Ethical Approval for the research described in this application.

Name (if you have an electronic signature please include it here)

 Date 13/01/2012

Documents enclosed with application:

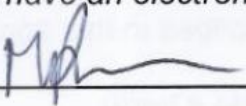
Document	Enclosed (please tick)	Not applicable (please tick)
Copy of consent form(s)	X (within the questionnaire)	
Copy of information sheet(s)	X	
Sample questionnaire	X	
Example interview questions	X	
Copy of proposed recruitment advert(s)	X	
Letters of support from any external organisations involved in the research		X
Evidence of disclosure check		X
Subject area risk assessment documentation		X
Any other documentation (please detail below)		X
Risk Assessment		X

35. If you are a student, show the completed form to your supervisor/Director of Studies and ask them to sign the statement below. If you are a member of staff, sign the statement below yourself.

- I am the supervisor/Director of Studies for this research.
- In my view this research is:

<i>See Research Ethics Guidelines Section 6</i>	Please tick
Non-invasive	X
Minor invasive using an established procedure at QMU	
Minor invasive using a NEW procedure at QMU	
Major invasive	


- I have read this application and I approve it.

Name (if you have an electronic signature please include it here)
 Date 11/01/2012

36. For all applicants, send the completed form to your Head of Subject or Head of Research Centre or, if you are an external researcher, submit the completed form to the Secretary to the QMU Research Ethics Panel. **You should not proceed with any aspect of your research which involves the use of participants, or the use of data which is not in the public domain, until you have been granted Ethical Approval.**

33. FOR COMPLETION BY THE HEAD OF SUBJECT / HEAD OF RESEARCH CENTRE

I grant Ethical Approval for this research.



Name (if you have an electronic signature please include it here)

Dr Richard Butt Head of Subject

Date 16/01/2012

Please send one copy of this form to the applicant and one copy to the Secretary to the Research Ethics Panel, Quality Enhancement Unit, Registry.
Date application returned: _____

Appendix J – Visual Representation of Quantitative Results

Figure J1 – Facebook Political Participation: Box Plots

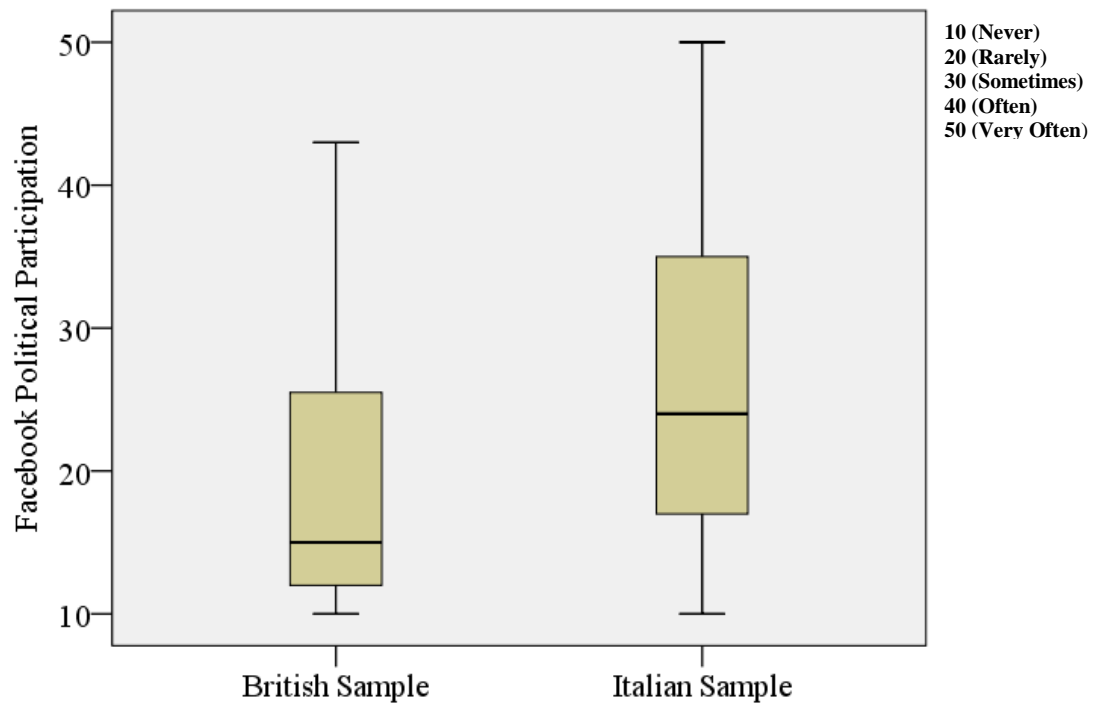


Figure J2 – Facebook Political Participation: Histograms

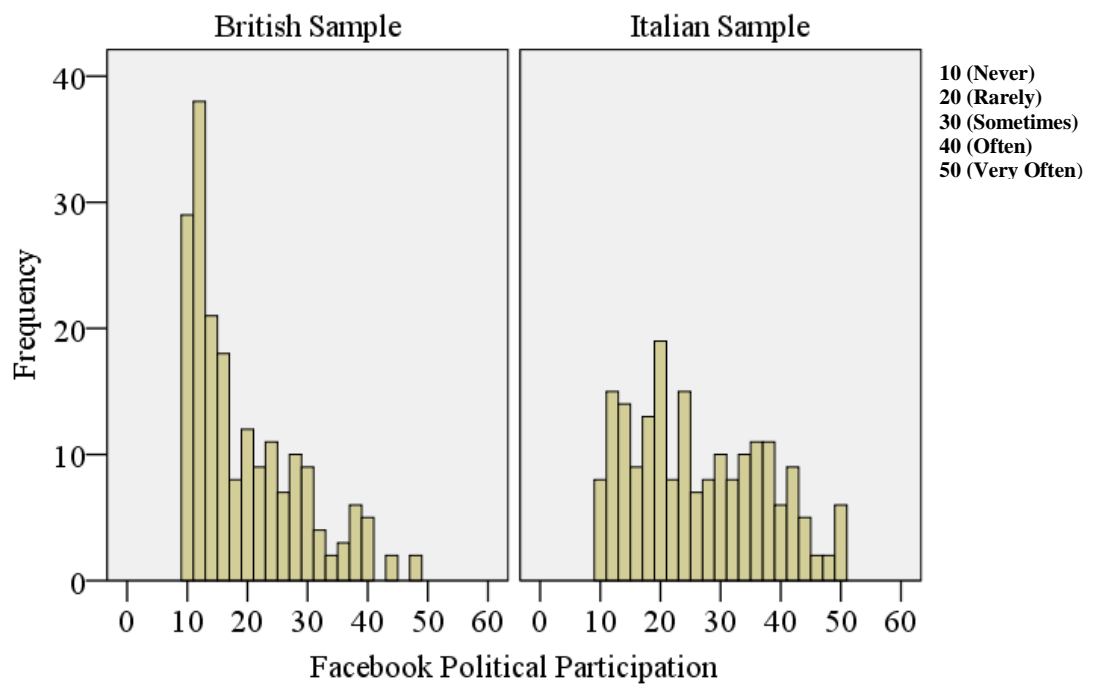


Figure J3 – Facebook Non-Political Activity: Histograms

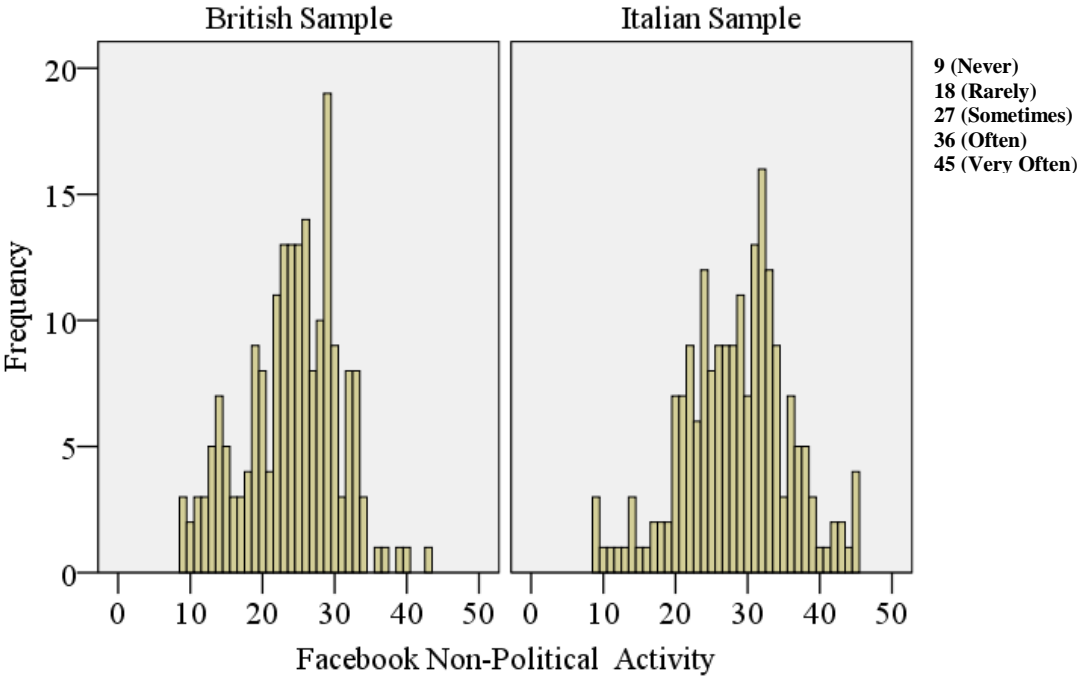


Figure J4 – Facebook Political Communication and Mobilisation: Box Plots

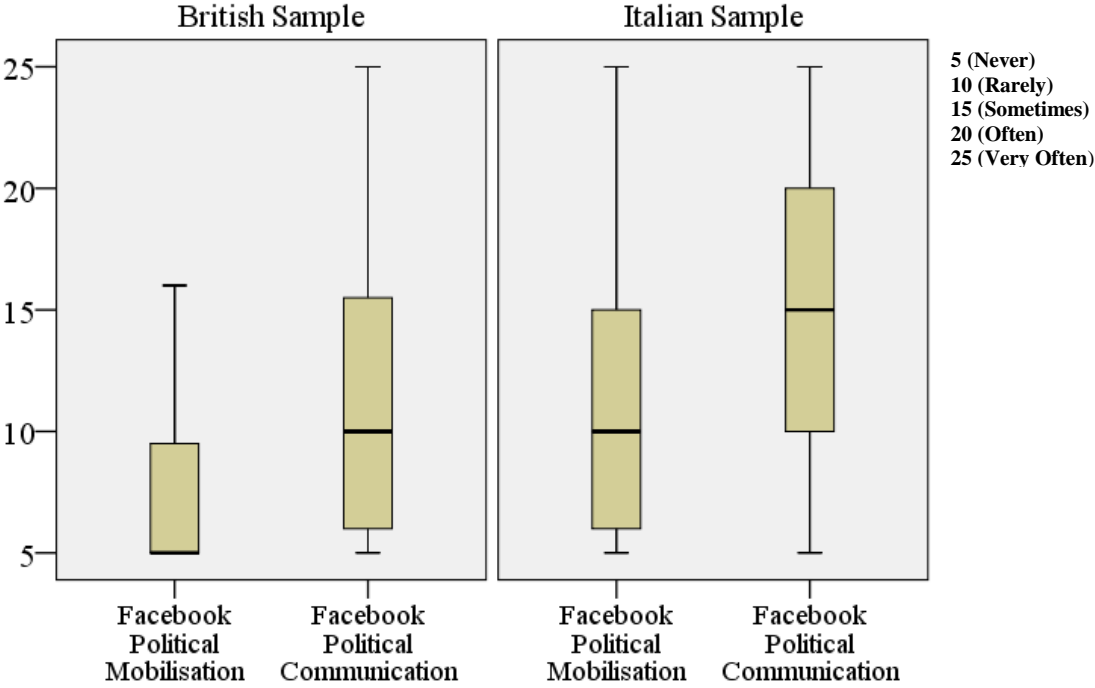


Figure J5 – Facebook Political Mobilisation: Histograms

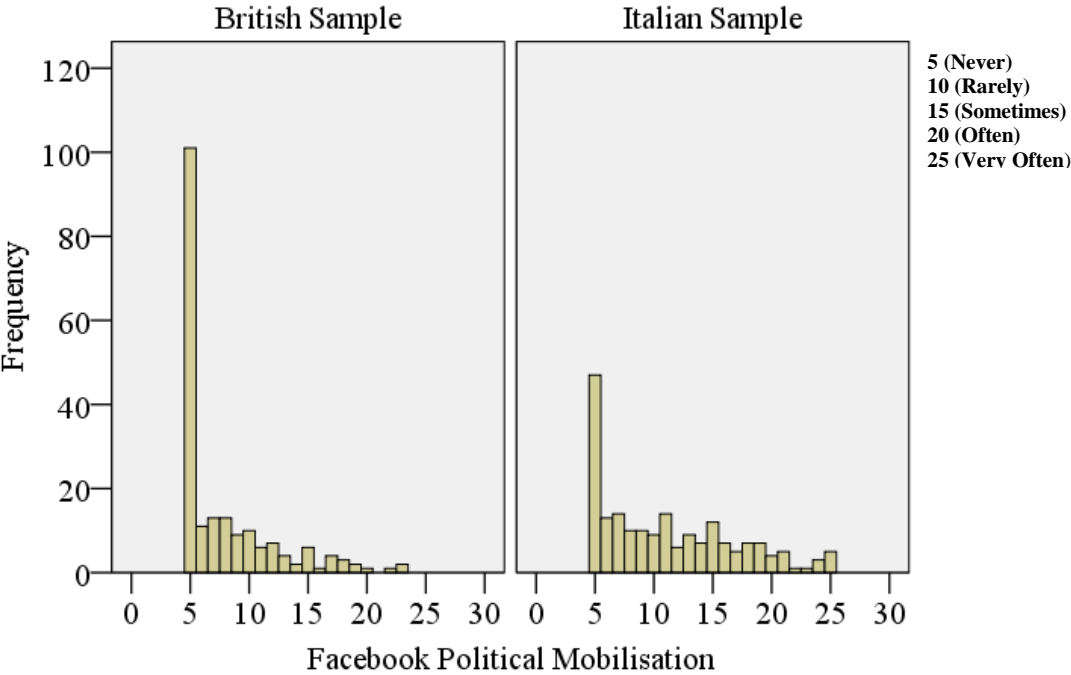


Figure J6 – Facebook Political Communication: Histograms

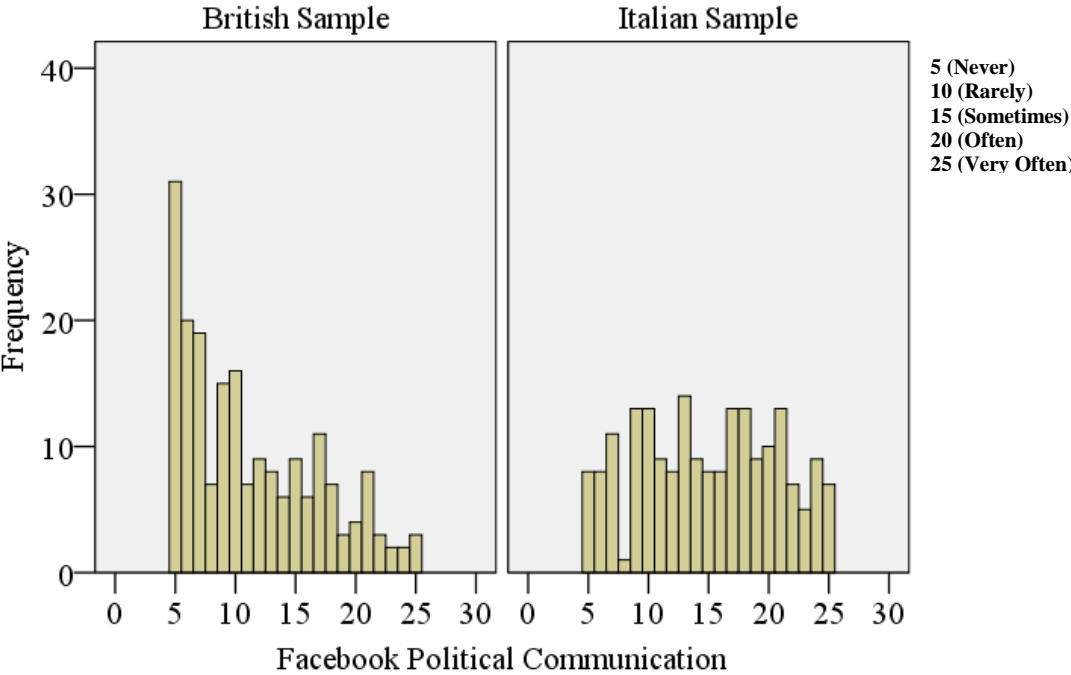


Figure J7 – Consumption of Political News: Bar Charts

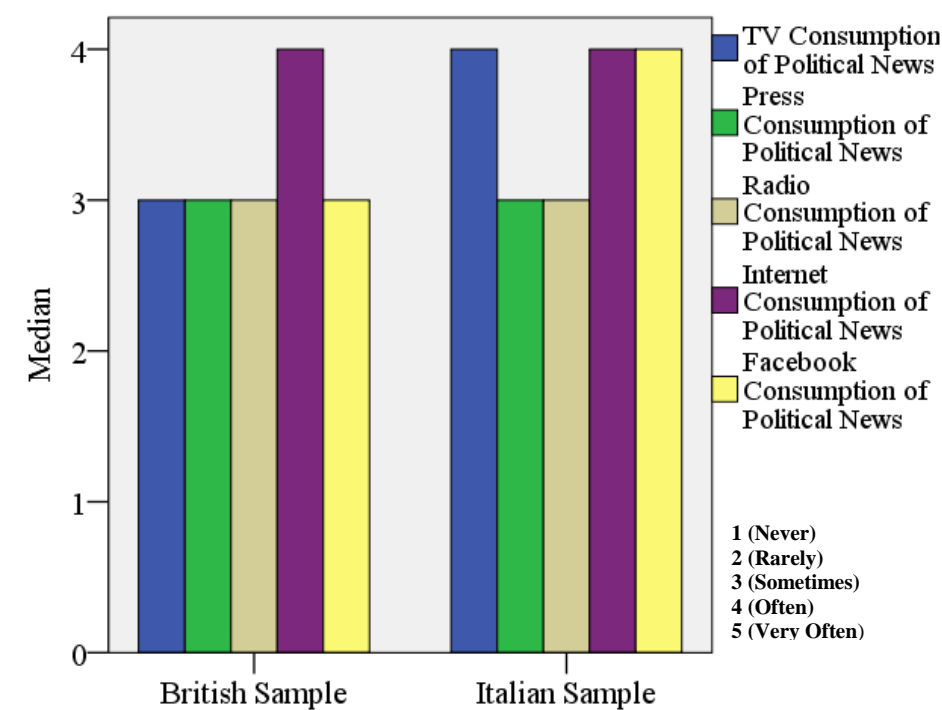


Figure J8 – Political Discussion: Bar Charts

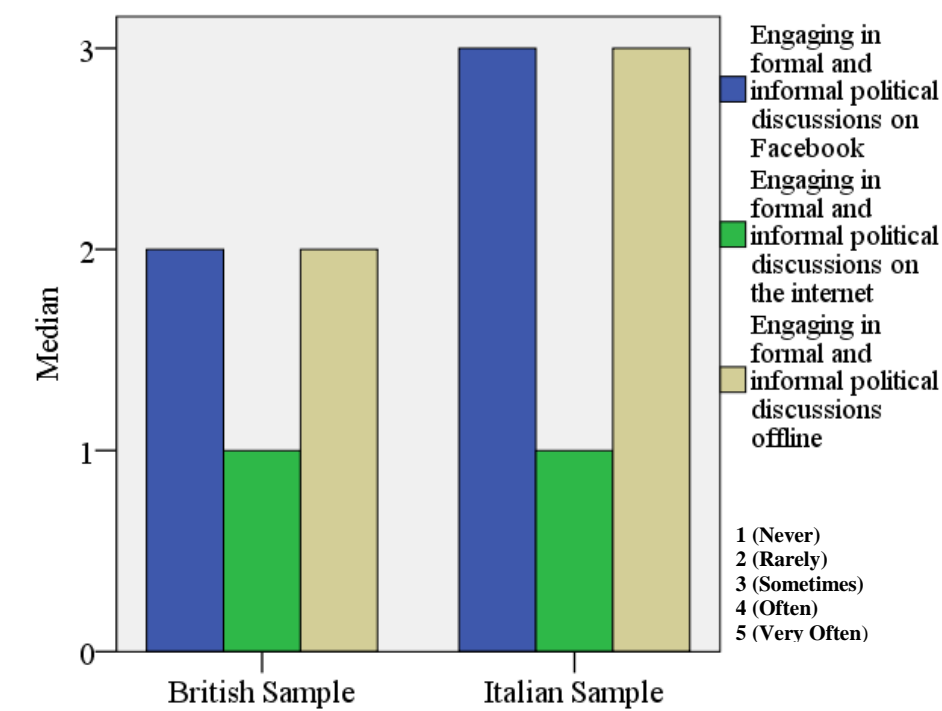


Figure J9 – Media Usage Time: Bar Charts

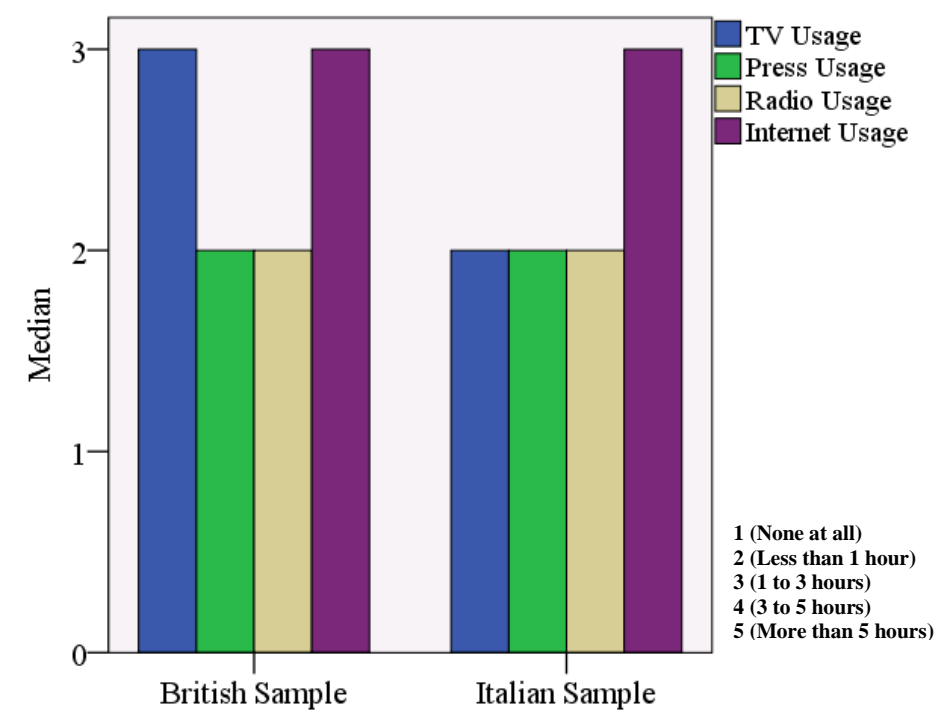


Figure J10 – Political Engagement: Box Plots

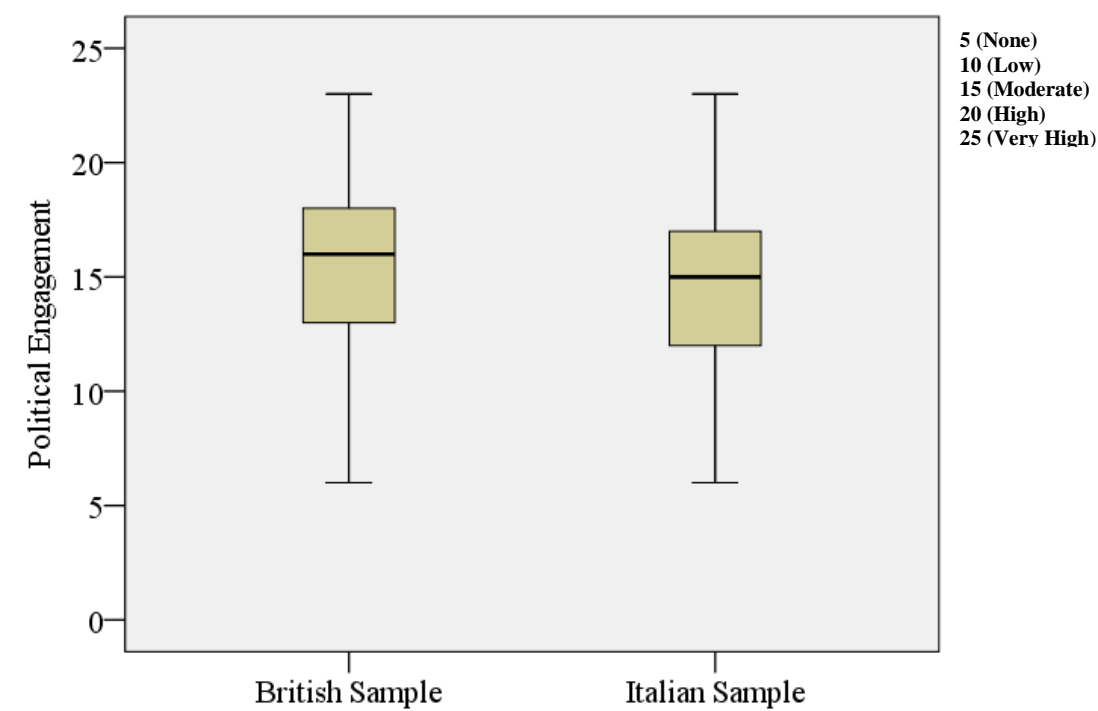


Figure J11 – Political Engagement: Histograms

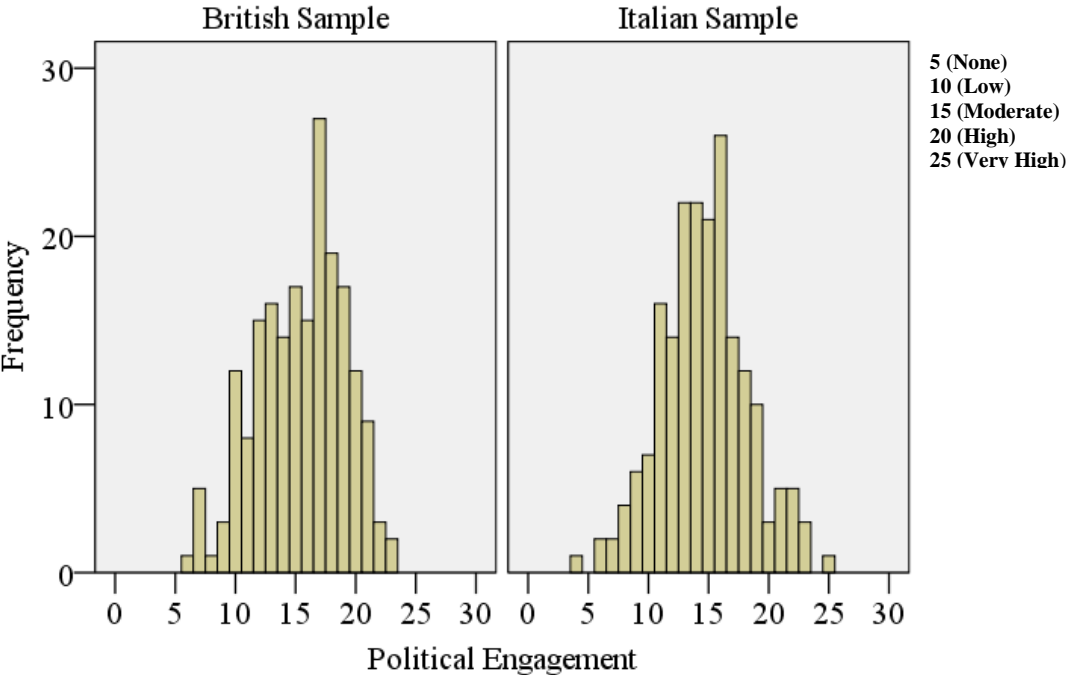


Figure J12 – Facebook Political Participation and Political Engagement: Scatter Plots

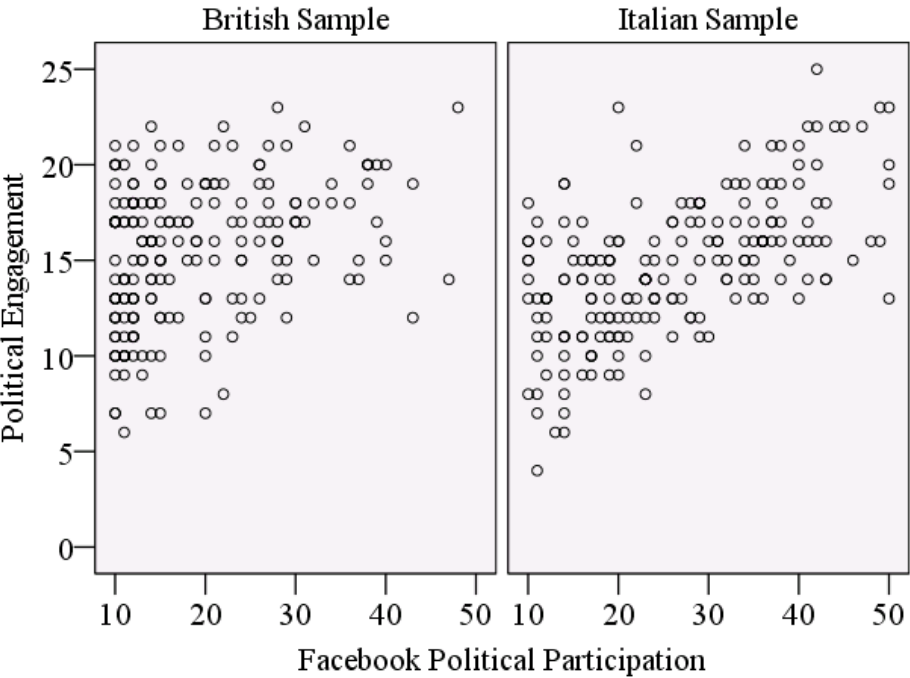


Figure J13 – Facebook and Internet Political Participation: Scatter Plots

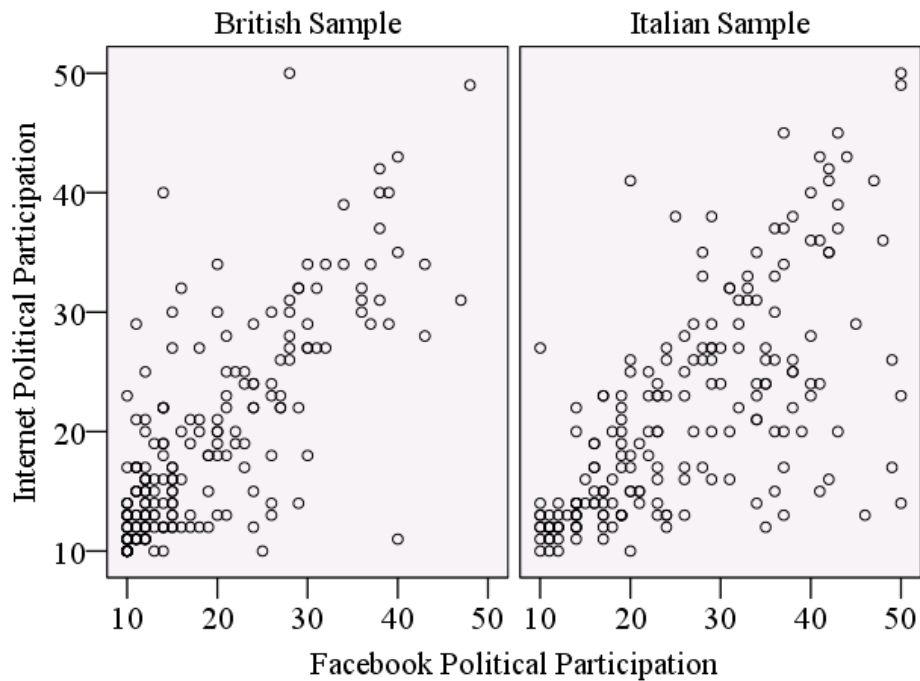


Figure J14 – Facebook and Offline Political Participation: Scatter Plots

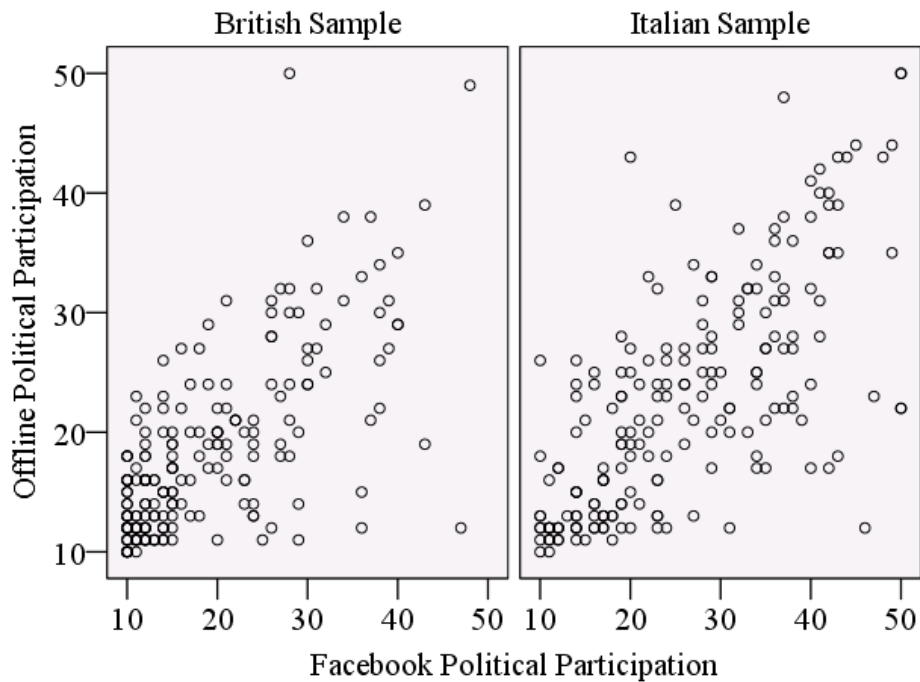


Figure J15 – Facebook Political Participation and Facebook Non-Political Activity: Scatter Plots

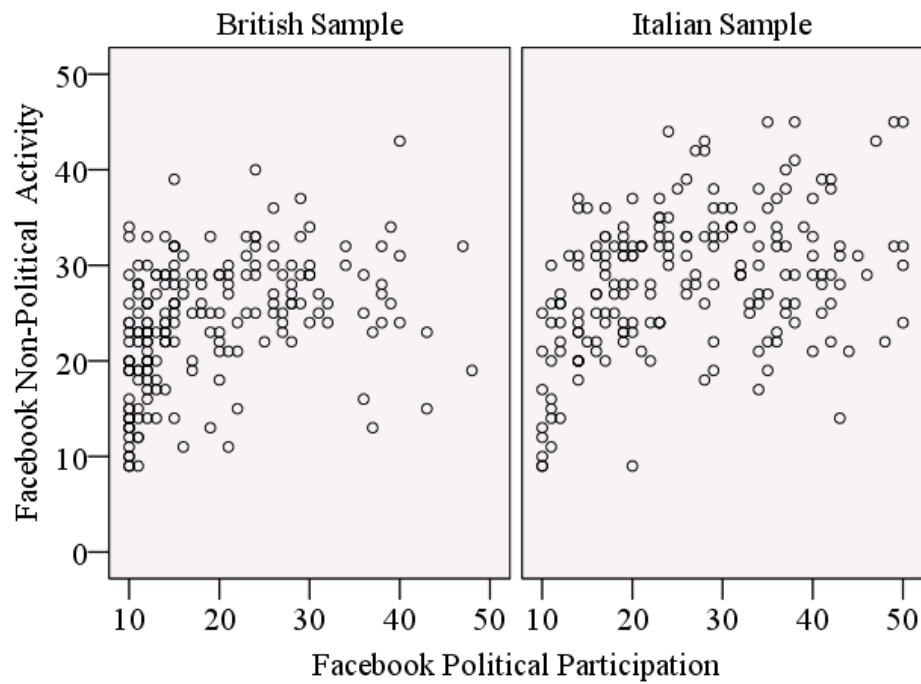


Figure J16 – Facebook Political Communication and Mobilisation: Scatter Plots

